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ONE THING NEEDFUL.

BY

(M. E. BRADDON,

AUTHOR OF "LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET," ETC. ETC.

Maxwell, Mary E. Braddon (Braddon)

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IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LEIPZIG

BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

1886.

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ONE THING NEEDFUL.

CHAPTER I.

“OH, MARKED FROM BIRTH, AND NURTURED FOR
THE SKIES!”

The gray old walls of Lashmar Castle rise in a massive pile above a broad reach of the Middle-shire Avon, which here makes a bold and sweeping curve, and dallies with its rushy banks, as if some spirit of these Lashmar woods were the Cleopatra to that watery Antony. The stream has such a languorous flow just at this point; the river here spreads itself into such a placid expanse, that one would hardly credit the current with force enough to turn a water-mill or drift a barge. It has an Arcadian air, a river made for Chloe and Phillis, and Strephon and his flock, and not for the vulgar uses of daily life. Yet

that very river waxes utilitarian enough, and carries all foul things which a seething populace cares to cast into its waters; it puts on the dark livery of smoke and dirt, only a few miles to the east of those Lashmar woods yonder, where the great manufacturing town of Brumm obscures the heavens with the smoke of numberless chimneys, and taints the atmosphere with the mixed odours of the people. But here there is no hint of that great industrial centre. No one basking on the green slope above this glassy stream, between a foreground of bulrushes and a background of immemorial oaks, would suspect the existence of such a place as Brumm within ten miles.

Yet, although its smoke made no stain upon the blue sky above yonder gray towers, Brumm had an influence on the inhabitants of Lashmar Castle, and that by no means a pleasant influence; as witnessed by her ladyship's temper upon this particular morning, as she sat at breakfast in the oak parlour, with her step-son, Lord Lashmar, and the Eton boy, her son.

Her ladyship was the Dowager Baroness Lashmar, and a woman of mark. She was one of the daughters of the illustrious Marchioness of Pitland, famous alike for wealth, talent, and force of cha-

racter. Old Lady Pitland had given laws and fashions to society for nearly forty years before she was translated to that better world in which, perhaps, there are neither coal mines nor leaders of fashion: and she had transmitted much of her managing power, and something of her talent and charm to her daughters, the eldest of whom, as Duchess of Malplaquet, was said to be quite the cleverest matron in England, having managed to marry all her daughters to rich men, and to have dressed and fed them in their spinsterhood, and maintained appearances in town and country on something under five thousand a year.

Lady Lashmar's powers as an economist had not been so severely taxed; for the Lashmars were rich in stocks and shares, as well as in that luxury of the well-born, broad acres; and they could smile serenely at the decay of rents. Lady Lashmar had always had as much money as she wanted, and some of her tastes were costly; but there was not an ounce of butter or a tea-cup of milk wasted at Lashmar Castle; there was not a dirty corner, or an unauthorised follower in the great, rambling, old house in Grosvenor Square, which had belonged to the Lashmars from the time of the Pitts and the Foxes, when that

aristocratic and exclusive square first came into being. Lady Lashmar had the eye of a hawk, and a mind constructed on the principle of the elephant's trunk, which can uproot an oak, or pick up a pin. Lady Lashmar's mind could grapple with public questions; and it could stoop to the details of the store-closet and the larder. Yet, it must not be supposed that Lady Lashmar's bodily presence was ever beheld in kitchen or store-room. Her mind did all the work. She had a housekeeper who trembled at her frown, and who obeyed her slavishly; and through this faithful servant she was able to rule every corner of her house, to measure every meal eaten by her household, to be assured that the footmen did not consume more than their due allowance of table-beer, and that the maids did not burn their candles in the small hours reading novels, or making bonnets.

Lady Lashmar had been ten years a widow, had enjoyed just a decade of undisputed dominion; she was eight-and-thirty, handsome, straight as a dart, with not a wrinkle or a gray hair. Mrs. Monsoon, the Princess's own particular dress-maker, had been heard to say, in the confidence of friendly intercourse, that Lady Lashmar was

the finest figure she had on her books, and the greatest screw.

"I don't believe I have made twenty pounds out of that woman in all the years I have worked for her," said Mrs. Monsoon; "but she shows off my gowns to perfection, and she brings me new customers."

An age in which scandals about the aristocracy are the current coin of conversation had not furnished one hint of evil about Lady Lashmar. It was of her that Lord Blandville, the cabinet minister, said, "My friend Lashmar's wife has all the virtues. She is handsome, well informed, accomplished, dignified, chaste as Diana, and the most disagreeable woman of my acquaintance."

Lady Lashmar was not a person who got into violent passions when she was angry. It was said that old Lady Pitland had been wont to swear like a trooper at anybody who crossed her imperious will. Lady Lashmar's anger took a more dignified and a more intense form. This morning the finely-cut face was almost livid with passion as her ladyship handed the local paper, the *Brumm Independent*, to her step-son.

They were sitting at a cosy round table in

one of the prettiest rooms in the castle. It was a small, low room, in which the old oak-panelling had been painted white. The ceiling was decorated with cupids and garlands. The high, narrow mantel-shelves were lit up by bright little bits of old oriental china. The curtains and chair-covers were of the delicatest chintz; and in every spot where flowers could be placed were bowls and shallow vases of the famous Lashmar roses, red and yellow, now in the plenitude of their summer beauty. So long as the roses lasted, Lady Lashmar would have no other flowers to decorate her rooms. It was in vain that the head-gardener put forward his rarities from the stoves, "I will have no exotics while I can have roses," said Lady Lashmar.

She sat with her face to the window, as one who need not fear the light. No, there was not one line that told of advancing years upon the hard, handsome face. Those finer emotions which plough the human countenance, the cark and fret of sensitive natures, had never affected Lady Lashmar. She had almost always had her own way, and she had almost always been happy. When it pleased Heaven to take her husband, after six years of married life, she bowed to the

rod. He was twenty years her senior, and a chronic invalid. It was better that he should be called away at fifty years of age than that he should drag out a life of suffering to the scriptural three-score and ten. Lady Lashmar thought that Providence would have done well to take her husband's afflicted son and to leave her own boy, a fine healthy youngster, to fill the place which the deformed step-son could never hold with proper dignity.

Yes, deformed. It is one of those words which are hardest to say. The old servants who had known Lord Lashmar from his cradle said that his back was a little weak; but his step-mother was not a person to sophisticate, or to use soft words. She knew that his spine had been curved in his infancy, a weakly child, born of an over-educated hyper-intellectual mother, and a father who had lived not wisely but too well. She knew that in the years to come that bent back would get gradually worse, that narrow chest would invite the attack of phthisis. She told herself that Hubert, Lord Lashmar, would never make old bones; but she feared that he might live long enough to marry and leave some sickly son who should blight the prospects of her

boy, Victorian, the very embodiment of physical power and fresh unblemished youth.

She had not been unkind to her step-son. She was far too clever a woman, to make that irreparable mistake. She resolved in the very beginning of things to live pleasantly with her husband's son. It would be so much better for them both; especially for her. Lashmar was fourteen when his father died, and Victorian was five, a difference of nine years; and Lashmar was old for his years. He had never been at any public school. He had not ventured to face the light-hearted republic of a University. What should he, the pariah, the stricken one, do there, among the athletic and robust? He had been brought up in cotton-wool, as it were. He had a middle-aged tutor, who had been with him from his tenth year, and who remained with him as librarian and secretary; and he had an old servant. He had travelled a good deal with the tutor and the servant. He had read more than most young men of five-and-twenty. He was a good classical scholar, and had some knowledge of science. In a word, he was a sickly lad, who had been brought up and nourished upon books; but he had fine instincts, and a strong humanitarian

feeling. The villagers about Lashmar adored him. He drank tea with the old women, read to them when they were ill, wrote letters for young and old, talked politics or metaphysics with the deep-thinkers, and carried the light of a noble intellect into every house he entered.

Lady Lashmar was intense in politics, and all her ideas upon legislation were of the good old Tory flavour. She hated Radicals; and her greatest affliction in life was that Lashmar Castle should lie as it were in the very bosom of revolution. Brumm was Radical to the backbone, and Brumm was only ten miles off. Brumm was a centre of Freethinking and Nihilism; and Brumm was at her door. If Aladdin's African magician had been at hand to whisk off her castle to the furthest north, or the remotest west of England, her ladyship would have paid him handsomely for the operation. But Lashmar Castle was planted deep in that detested soil; and as her ladyship despised the dower house, which was hers by right, and loved this baronial mansion and its much statelier surroundings, she was fain to endure the vicinity of Brumm and its forty thousand operatives.

"It is an outrage against the decencies of life," she exclaimed.

"What's the matter, mother?" asked Lashmar, looking up at her with his deep-sunken eyes, thoughtful eyes of darkest hazel. "Is it anything about Boldwood?"

"Of course it is about Boldwood. That low creature has been holding forth at another meeting. They seem to be perpetually having meetings at Brumm."

"They have very few other pleasures," murmured Lashmar.

"They have theatres and circuses and horrid low music rooms," said her ladyship. "Surely those are enough for them!"

"Enough for the frivolous majority; but you see there is a superior minority who have learnt to think and who want to say their little say upon great public questions."

"Those thinkers and spouters are the pest of society," exclaimed Lady Lashmar, throwing her paper aside, and going on with her breakfast, with an air of finding no savour in either truffled chicken or the Arabian berry. "Over-education is the greatest evil of the age. Thank heaven the people themselves are beginning to feel the burden of it. After clamouring for free schools

and higher teaching they are beginning to groan under the tyranny of compulsory education."

"Perhaps that is because when they cry for bread we give them a stone," answered Lashmar in his gentle, meditative way. "We cram 'ologies down the throats of starving children; we feed babes and sucklings with grammar and logic, and then wonder that they are not grateful."

"That class of people never are grateful," said Lady Lashmar, calmly ignoring her stepson's drift. "But, fortunately, there are not many such wretches as Boldwood, or we should have this castle sacked, and find ourselves turned out upon the high road. Boldwood is worse than Robespierre. Just read his tirade upon the unequal division of property, his revolutionary language about great landowners, and his savage insolence about the Duke of Northerland."

"Boldwood always goes too far. Yet there are generally some flashes of sense amidst the cloud of rhetoric. I read that speech of his before you came down to breakfast. He pleads the cause of the yeoman rather cleverly—when one considers that as an operative he cannot have very keen sympathies with the agricultural class. His idea of dividing some of our great farms into

small holdings, and selling them to the peasantry, to be paid for by instalments, upon the same system as that on which needy people buy pianos, is not at all bad."

"And a pleasant place England would be for decent people to live in if it were chopped up in little bits to please such men as Mr. Boldwood. But, really, Lashmar, I believe you are at heart a Radical," said her ladyship.

"No, I am a progressive Conservative; and I believe the truest conservatism consists in doing the utmost we can for the people. We can only teach them to respect the privileges of property by letting them taste the sweetness of possession. There is no stauncher Conservative than your working-man who has saved a hundred pounds."

"You always talk like a book, Lashmar," sneered her ladyship; "I should like to hear you speak in reply to this man Boldwood, at a great public meeting."

In her heart of hearts she was thinking how sorry a figure this hunchbacked stepson of hers would make upon a public platform; how poorly his low, grave tones would sound after Boldwood's base bellowing, a voice which thundered and re-

verberated through a vast building, as if it were the roar of Bashan's mightiest bull.

"Would you really like to hear me speak?" asked Lashmar, smiling faintly.

Was there ever a young man who has read and thought deeply who does not long to give speech to his thoughts? It is to satisfy this desire that Mechanics' Institutes are built; it is for this that an Athenæum is a pleasant thing in a town.

"I should like this blatant beast to be answered!" replied her ladyship somewhat evasively.

"Then I will do my best to answer him next Wednesday week," said Lashmar. "There is to be a Conservative meeting at the Town Hall on that night. Colonel Spillington, the new Conservative candidate, is going to address the electors. It is expected that Boldwood will be in full force, and that there will be a row. Spillington has asked me to support him—and—yes, I really should like to answer Boldwood. Mine will be a very poor speech, of course; a very tame reply to Boldwood, who is a born orator; but I shall have education on my side—"

"And prestige," added Victorian, who had been too busy with his breakfast to speak before.

"I only wish I were old enough to tackle Boldwood. I'd make his hair curl."

"What hideous expressions these boys pick up at Eton," said her ladyship, with a shiver. Then with a fond approving look at the handsome lad, she said proudly,

"I hope you will be in Parliament before you are ten years older, Victorian, and that you will be a distinguished politician."

"Oh, I don't mind going into the House in ten years time," answered the boy easily, "but I should like to have my fling on the continent for a few years first, as Henry St. John had, don't you know, before he sat for the family borough. Nothing enlarges a fellow's views like diplomacy. I shall get on to one of the legations directly I leave college, Paris, if possible, and see as much as I can of life before I pin myself down to politics."

"Paris is an admirable place—for a young man who wants to waste his time pleasantly," said Lashmar, smiling at the embryo diplomatist.

"Did you waste your time there?" asked the boy.

"No, Vic. I am not the kind of person to

succeed in Parisian society. My gifts are in another line."

"Poor Old Lashmar! You are out and away the cleverest chap I know. When I think of how much you've read, and how much better you can construe a Greek play than our Toffs in the sixth, I take off my hat to you. Do speak next Wednesday week, Lash, and give that Radical chap a good shaking."

"We'll hear what Spillington says about it," answered Lashmar quietly; "if he wants me, I'll speak. He is to stay here the night before the meeting: You don't mind, do you, mother?"

Lord Lashmar always deferred to his step-mother in all household matters, invitations, and engagements. There were only four rooms in Lashmar Castle in which he reigned supreme. The library was one, and his own sitting-room, bed-room, and dressing-room were the others. Outside those rooms he exercised no authority. The Lashmar library was the finest in Middle-shire—one of the finest in England. The apartment which accommodated that noble collection of books was worthy of the treasures it contained. It was long and lofty, with a fire-place at each end, the oak chimney-pieces carved by Grinling

Gibbons, the ceiling enriched with oak carving, the book-cases in harmony with chimney-pieces and ceiling. Lord Lashmar's writing table and reading desk, his capacious arm-chair and dainty little tea-table, only made an island of furniture in the vast expanse of oak flooring, relieved here and there by an oasis of old Indian carpet. The only bright colouring in the room was furnished by the books. The Lashmars had been connoisseurs in bookbinding for the last hundred years. They had spent thousands upon that elegant art. They had "wasted" thousands, said the unappreciative outer world, persons slow to understand that the case of a shabby-looking duodecimo Elzevir ought to cost four or five pounds.

Lashmar's sitting-room opened out of the library and would have seemed a large room in a smaller house. It was lined from floor to ceiling with bookshelves, containing the young peer's own particular library, those books which had been the one luxury of his life. New books, or new editions, for the most part—books in several languages—books that had been their owner's consolation in many a day of bodily weakness and weariness: for Lashmar's life had been made up of brief intervals of health between long periods

of illness. Those halcyon days of well-being were very sweet to him. At such times he spent almost all his life out of doors, and revelled in nature's loveliness as only a highly-trained mind can revel; tasting the most infinite details in the feast of beauty, the lights and shadows on the petals of a primrose, the sheen on a beetle's wing; enjoying every variety of atmosphere and colouring, every form of lowliest life, with that sensitive instinct for nature which breathes in every line of Wordsworth's descriptive verse.

He had travelled much, and knew nature in her most glorious aspects, but he had no need to go far afield for beauty. The woodlands around Lashmar, the low hills and pastoral valleys, the winding Avon and the English hedgerows furnished a banquet which always satisfied the longings of his soul.

"If I had but any one to whom I could tell all my foolish fancies, I should be ever so much happier," he said to himself sometimes regretfully, "but there is no one. Victorian would only laugh at me as a queer old chap; and my lady would lift her eyebrows and inwardly wonder if there was a strain of madness in the Lashmar blood."

CHAPTER II.

“WHENCE AND WHAT ART THOU, EXECRABLE
SHAPE?”

COLONEL SPILLINGTON dined at Lashmar Castle upon the night before the meeting. He was a fine average specimen of the British officer, bluff, outspoken, unintellectual, right-thinking and honest, a staunch Conservative, and a thorough gentleman. He was a man of just sufficiently good family to be tolerable in the eyes of the great Lady Pitland's daughter. There was at least no taint of trade in his lineage, and he was therefore qualified to sit at the table with the lady whose wealth had for the most part come out of the coal pit, and who naturally scorned the idea of commerce. He was not elated about his election, and had dark doubts as to the power of the Radicals in Brumm. “There must be some respectable people in the place,” he said.

“I fear not,” replied her ladyship. “If there were any respectable people such a person as Boldwood would not be allowed to exist.”

"Unfortunately for us, mother, the days are past when an obnoxious citizen could be sent about his business, or even put in the pillory. Boldwood is peaceable enough in his private life, I believe, although he is somewhat truculent on the platform."

"Somewhat!" echoed Lady Lashmar, "you have such a namby-pamby way of expressing yourself. I have never heard the creature speak, but I have read his virulent nonsense in the papers, and that is enough."

"Virulent, sometimes, I grant, but not always nonsense," said Lashmar quietly. "The man's ideas are Utopian, but he expresses himself with a certain rough vigour, and with a strain of poetry—in fact, the man is a born orator—and although he is for the most part illogical, he has occasional flashes of common-sense."

"Who is this Boldwood?" asked the Colonel, trifling with an olive; "everybody has been talking to me about him since I consented to stand for Brumm; and, as I am a stranger in the land and his reputation is entirely local, I confess myself still in the dark as to this powerful antagonist whom I am to meet to-morrow night."

"Mr. Boldwood is a high priest of advanced

Radicalism," answered Lashmar. "He believes in the divine right of every man to lay hands upon any other man's possessions. He is strong upon the old thesis, *la propriété c'est le vol*. The first man who enclosed a bit of ground was the enemy of the whole human race. He is the sworn foe of the landowner and the manufacturer. His gods are Rousseau and Karl Marx. He would level all ranks, wage war against all privileged classes, raze this house of ours to the ground, or turn it into a hospital or a phalanstery, do away with Monarchy and the House of Lords, and establish a Republican senate of working men in which the brain-workers or the professional classes should be as one in three. He would have universal peace—universal free trade: and pending the falling in of other nations with these views, he would have England walk in gospel ways, and turn her left cheek to be smitten by the hand that has boxed her soundly on the right cheek."

"You say he is a good speaker."

"I have never heard him; but I am told that he is magnificent, and his speeches read like oratory. I am looking forward to the fun to-morrow night. We may be in a minority; but there are plenty of Conservatives in Brumm, in

spite of her ladyship's doubts, and we shall make a good fight. From what I have heard of Boldwood he is not altogether a ruffian—indeed there are some people who declare that he is a gentleman by birth, and took a degree at Oxford. Yet I should hardly think this likely, from the appearance of the man. He was pointed out to me once in the street as I was driving through Brumm—a giant with unkempt hair, disreputable clothes, and a slouching walk. I hardly saw his face, but I got a good idea of his build and general style. He is a brass-worker, earns high wages, and is said to be almost a genius in his handicraft. He is not a native of Brumm; and I don't think anyone in the place knows much about his antecedents. He is an infidel, and seems proud of his infidelity. He came to the town seven years ago, with a wife and a baby. The wife died soon after his arrival, and he has not married again. That, Colonel, is the full extent of my information about Jonathan Boldwood."

"I am looking forward to my encounter with the gentleman!" said the Colonel cheerily. "He shall see that I can stand fire. But I look to you to reply to him. I am no orator."

"A gentleman is always more than a match for a cad," said Victorian, who had been making havoc with the peaches while his elders were talking.

"Not when the cad is on his own ground, and has an audience of five or six hundred cads to back him up," answered Spillington. "How many does your Town-hall hold, by the way, Lashmar?"

"Fifteen hundred; and of those you may be sure more than half will be disciples of Boldwood; but that need not alarm you, as not half of those are voters."

The meeting was at eight o'clock, so the house party at the Castle took a late luncheon, and started for Brumm soon after tea. Supper after the meeting, was to serve as a substitute for the eight o'clock dinner. This had been duly explained to Colonel Spillington, who liked his meals, and thoroughly approved of the Lashmar *chef*. He laid in a heavy stock at luncheon, calculating that there was a terrible gulf to be bridged over before he should again find himself face to face with substantial food. He detested tea, and cakes and muffins, and all

those dainties with which Victorian gorged himself at five o'clock, when the little party assembled in Lady Lashmar's morning room, full of the approaching fray.

"Do have some of these chocolate cakes, Colonel," said Victorian, with his mouth full, "they're so good."

"Thanks, no, my boy. I haven't tasted sweets for the last twenty years, and I am afraid of tea. It always turns to acidity. If," with a deprecating glance at her ladyship, "if I might have a brandy and soda."

"By all means," assented the dowager graciously, though she inwardly scorned a man who wanted to be periodically sustained by brandy and soda.

Lashmar rang the bell. "A little Dutch courage, eh, Colonel?" he said, laughing.

"You're beginning to funk Boldwood, I know," said Victorian, "and I don't wonder. He looks like one of those fellows in Homer—Cyclops, don't you know? I've heard that he lived for ever so many years with the gipsies, and that his wife was a gipsy girl. He's a rough sort, Colonel; and I shouldn't wonder if he wanted to come to fisticuffs with you on the platform."

"If he comes to fisticuffs, I'm ready for him," answered Spillington gaily, "it's the talking that will bother me."

They started soon after six, intending to be early at the Town Hall, where the candidate had to meet his agent, and some of the Conservative notabilities of Brumm.

It was a delicious summer evening, calm, peaceful, the atmosphere steeped in sunlight, the earth breathing warmth and perfume: a delightful evening on which to loll against the cushions of Lady Lashmar's barouche, to be gently lulled upon Cee springs, as the seventeen-handers trotted with rhythmical beat along the level turnpike road—a lovely road for the first half of the journey, a road between fair green pastures and golden corn, by wood and copse, and hillocky common land, where the dwarf furze shone yellow amidst the purpling heather, a road by peaceful village and Elizabethan homestead, by straw-yards populous with lazy kine, by piggery and poultry yard, and duck pond, and cattle trough. Colonel Spillington, who was of the streets streety, thought that the country was a pretty place enough in the westering sun, but that it had an ugly smell, and must needs be the abomination of desolation in the winter, except

for a hunting man. And Colonel Spillington had nothing in common with that great creature, the British Sportsman. He had shot tigers and bears, and had stuck pigs in Hindostan; but he did not appreciate the raptures of waiting about at corners for a reluctant fox in a north-east wind, or a chilly drizzle.

"A charming country," he said patronisingly, "but I wonder you can live so many months in the year at Lashmar Castle!"

"I am fond of the country, and Lashmar detests London," answered her ladyship. "I dare say when Victorian grows up I shall spend more of my time in Grosvenor Square."

"I am not going to live in London," said her son disdainfully. "When I leave the University I mean to see life. I shall travel all over Europe. I mean to be a man of the world."

"You had better stay in London if you want to see life," said the Colonel. "The man who has not learnt his Society-alphabet in London is always half a savage. It is all very well to talk about the superiority of foreign manners, but the man who has been educated on the Continent is generally a tiger!"

"Then I will be a tiger," retorted Victorian stoutly.

They were nearing Brumm, and there was an unmistakable change in the atmosphere. The fine gold had become dim. That pure radiance of the westering sun was thickened and blurred, yet beautiful exceedingly athwart the smoke-clouds. The tall shafts began to show against the blue horizon, a veritable grove of chimneys; and soon her ladyship's splendid barouche, with its big bay horses, white-wigged coachman, and powdered footman, its emblazoned panels, and brazen harness, was thrilling the souls of operatives and factory-girls as it flashed along the dingy crowded streets, past the beer-shops and the pork butchers, and the general dealers, and the bakers, amidst odours of tallow and herrings, and onions and shoe-leather and beer. The street boys called out "Hooray," as the carriage went by. One keen-eyed brat caught the distorted profile of Lashmar's back, and cried out, "My eye! look at the hunchback."

Lashmar's quick ear heard, and his thin lips contracted ever so slightly, with the faintest expression of mental pain. He had heard just such a speech many a time before. It did not come

upon him as a revelation. He knew that he was a creature apart, marked out and branded by Nature. Wealth and rank and culture could never undo what Nature, in one blundering moment, had done. The hand that had turned out so many thousands of ploughboys and operatives, beggars and rascals, perfect from head to heel, had faltered in the making of the last Lord of Lashmar: and he must pay the penalty of fate. He bore the disgrace as patiently as he bore that other and heavier burden of neuralgic pain, which had wrung his weak frame at intervals ever since he could remember. He had fought against long odds; had exercised that poor weak body of his to the utmost—rowing, riding, walking. He, the hunchback, was a skilled gymnast; but he had never exhibited his skill in any public gymnasium. His own keen sense of the ridiculous hindered any such foolish vanity.

The meeting had been convened by the local Conservative Association, but it was not a ticket meeting. The hall was to be open to all comers, and the hall was crammed to overflowing before the speeches began. The great oblong room reeked with unwashed, or badly washed, humanity, a multitude clad in long-worn corduroy and fustian,

simmering in the glare of the gas. To Lady Lashmar, seated on the platform, that sea of faces in that coarse flare of yellow light, suggested an over-populated pandemonium. They looked like devils, some of those operatives, to her unaccustomed eye. Malignant devils—swarthy, grinning, lurid.

The chairman opened the business in a mildly conventional manner; recapitulated the usual commonplaces. The country was on the eve of a great crisis, a crisis involving national interests and individual interests alike, trade, security, prosperity, peace at home, honour abroad. The time had come when the Conservative party were called upon to emerge from that shade in which their modesty delighted; the time, in short—after a great deal more to the same purpose—had come for a long pull, and a strong pull, and a pull altogether.

This was the chairman's popular style, which he had generally found answer before a mixed audience. But on this present occasion, before the Conservatives could begin their applause, a hoarse voice at the back of the hall called out, "Yes, and pull the boat over; that's about what you Conservatives generally does when you do

pull together," and there was a laugh which spoiled the effect of Mr. Mason Bank's peroration. And now it was time for the candidate to introduce himself, which he did in a somewhat rambling speech upon old, old lines. The men of Brumm had heard such speeches ever since they had possessed ears to hear political discussion. Colonel Spillington was a poor orator, and he had nothing new to say. But he was hearty, and he had a pleasant manner; he had the courage of his opinions too, and threw some pretty big stones at the opposite party, in the teeth of hisses and groans from the majority, for it appeared as if the Radicals were the most numerous. They were certainly the loudest. It might be that noise prevailed over numbers.

Before the Colonel could sit down, a man stood up in the middle of the hall, an Anak, a giant among dwarfs, for the men of Brumm were stunted by unhealthy toil. A dark, threatening face was turned towards the platform, full in the glare of the gas; a large face with a broad forehead, high cheek bones and massive jaw, flashing eyes under shaggy brows, a shock of coarse black hair.

Lashmar looked at that face transfixed. He

had seen it before—seen it years and years ago—in a dream, before he was born, yes, in some mystical anterior life, as it seemed to him. He knew its every line. Yes, those lineaments were graven deep upon the tablets of memory.

CHAPTER III.

"ALL THAT HAVE EYES TO WEEP, SPARE ONE TEAR
WITH ME."

"I RISE to move an amendment," said Jonathan Boldwood, in a deep strong voice.

"On the platform, get upon the platform, Boldwood," roared the crowd. "Let's hear thee, man, thou hast always summat good to say. Bravo, Boldwood! Three cheers for Boldwood!"

And there was a shout that seemed as if it would rend the roof of the building, a thrill of delight as at the appearance of some favourite actor. The crowd made way for the orator, and the applause grew deafening, as he scrambled on to the platform, shook his rough mane, folded his arms, and looked round the assembly, those eyes of his shining like coals of fire.

"You want to hear me speak, friends," he said, in his deep thrilling voice. "You shall! You have had plenty of fustian from these gentlemen. You shall have a little bit of sound cloth

from me—stuff that will stand wear and tear, not devil's dust that will come to bits directly you pull at it." And then he began to attack the Colonel's speech. He took the old, old story, point by point, from the Revolutionist's side; he laughed to scorn the old institutions, the old opinions, bishops and peers, church and state, royal sinecures, royal allowances, princely nobodies, useless functionaries. He spoke with the force and vigour of Danton, with the *finesse* of Mirabeau; he spoke as a rebel against his queen and against his God. His finest points were barbed with blasphemy; but he had the audience with him from the moment he opened his mouth. He swayed them as the wind sways the reeds by the river.

"*Your* God, the High-church God, the Tory God, made man in His own image, you tell us. If so He had two images, or you have strangely altered and degraded, mutilated and defaced the image He made. There is man as God made him, free, upright, independent, with all the world before him where to choose, told to live by the sweat of his brow, and to till the land, but never told that he should have no land to till, that his brow and every inch of his body should sweat in

the grinding toil of the factory, that your God's beautiful earth should be shut and fenced off from him by an everlasting park-paling, that his world to choose from should be an endless turn-pike road, where he should tramp for ever through the dust and heat of summer, through the mud and mire of winter, in the glare of the dog-days, or with his face to the biting north-easter, and with no halting place but the casual ward, no bourne but the pauper's grave. That is the type of God's noblest work, and the commonest type: such men are as millions against your thousands, you who toil not, you who spend the wages of other men's toil.

"God made the toiler, made Adam to work for his bread—his own bread, mark you—sowing and reaping on his own land, for himself and his family, enjoying the first fruits of the land, rejoicing in the fulness of the harvest, the fatness of his flock, having his share in all the beauty and the glory of this earth. That was patriarchal man as God made him, and as he might have been this day, for God's earth is wide enough for all who live upon it, if it were not for ha-has and park-fences. God's earth is not big enough to keep an aristocracy, not big enough to give

parks and deer forests to all the dukes and earls who have sprung from the amours of dead and rotten kings. That is what this earth won't do, and that is what the people of England mean to set their faces against—the profligate splendour of the few who fatten upon the bloody sweat of the many: ay, my friends, a sweat as bloody as that agony in the garden of which your priests tell us; for it means the gradual waste of life worn out untimely in unnatural toil, life-blood ebbing away drop by drop in the factory and in the mine, lives wasted in premature old age, children born and bred in dirt, in ignorance and in squalor, in order that a few foolish faces should be topped by coronets and a sprinkling of fine gentlemen should lead the fashions in good manners and bad morals. Can any man among you be simple enough to swallow such a lie as that God's image is reflected in *this* type of man? No, my friends: these are the sons of Belial, who come among you this night 'flown with insolence and wine,' not to ask you for your suffrages, but to order how you shall vote."

He flung back the coarse iron-gray hair from his low broad brow, and stood like a tower, while

the hall rang with applause, varied by timorous hisses from the Conservative minority.

Where had Lashmar seen him before? What was that anterior existence in which this man's face had flashed upon him as it flashed now? but only for a transient span, appearing and vanishing almost in the same moment, flashing past him as it were in a whirlwind, swept away upon the wings of the hurricane.

It was either in that dim, unknown world of a previous life, or it was long, long ago in his earliest boyhood.

Yes, he recalled it all now; the whole scene stood out before him.

It was at the University boat-race. He was a little fellow, with his father and mother, on a lawn at Mortlake, a green lawn shadowed by leafless lime-trees. He was clinging to his mother's gown—the poor sickly mother already marked for death, though he knew it not—clinging to her, breathless with excitement, catching the fever of the crowd, scarce knowing what thrilled him so. The crowd and the river seemed to rock under the cold brightness of the March day, as the two boats shot under the bridge, Oxford three lengths behind.

"That big man, number six, pulls like the devil," cried Lord Lashmar. "If he can only last, I believe he'll make them win. I never saw such an oar."

He mentioned the man's name, but his son had forgotten that, though he distinctly remembered his father's speech. He had his own little boat on the Avon at this time, and had just learnt to row, so was keenly interested in feats of oarsmanship.

The Oxford boat came past the lawn, gaining upon its antagonist, and then Hubert Lashmar saw the face of the oarsman—a dark, ugly face, strong jaw, broad forehead, beetle brows, but a face made radiant, glorified, god-like almost, by triumph. Oxford was winning. The stroke put on a tremendous spurt, to which number six answered with might and main. The boat was almost lifted out of the water. The other oars nerved themselves for a superhuman effort; a great cry of exultation broke from the crowd: "Oxford wins!" Men thrilled with the delight of having witnessed a miracle, and that Oxford crew was cheered as never men were cheered along the banks of the Thames.

This was the man. Number six in the Ox-

ford boat nineteen years ago, and the brass-worker yonder, were one and the same. The face was too peculiar a face to be easily forgotten or mistaken for another.

Lashmar rose and came to the front of the platform, braving that multitude of eyes, that broad glare of light. But here there were no street boys to jeer at his deformity. He stood up before men; and Nature's unkindness was a claim upon the respect of even the lowest among the crowd.

He was of the middle height, fairly proportioned from the waist downwards, but the misshapen back and the neck sunk between the shoulders too obviously indicated a malformation of the spine. The pale, classical features, the slender white hands, the indescribable air of high birth and refinement interested even these roughs of Brumm. They had heard that this young Lord Lashmar was a student and a poet, something like that Lord Byron of whom most of them had read and heard, whose poetry was familiar to many among them in these days of free libraries and advanced thought. They liked the look of the Lord of Lashmar Castle; though they had pledged themselves to those new ideas

which were to bring all such lordlings to their proper level, cancel all old grants of land, reduce all ancient privileges, and make the soil of England common property, and all things equal between man and man.

He began to speak, and was heard in silence. He had a grave and steadfast manner, a low, earnest voice, which was distinctly heard at the end of that crowded hall—a voice of a very different calibre from that of Jonathan Boldwood, but a voice of considerable compass notwithstanding, and of finest quality.

“My friends,” he began, “the gentleman who has just addressed you calls himself your friend, but we all know what the demagogue’s friendship means. It means climbing into somebody else’s seat upon other men’s shoulders. You have heard of Marat, the man whom Charlotte Corday stabbed in his bath, hoping by that one bloody act to stem the torrent of blood which that man was shedding. Now, I am not going to say that Mr. Boldwood is like Marat, or that he would rejoice in that deluge of blood which to Marat was the very wine of life. Mr. Boldwood is an Englishman, and Marat was a Frenchman, and your English demagogue, I am happy to say, is always a very mild translation

of the French original. Yet I will venture to say that if Marat were standing on this platform to-night, he would talk to you very much as Mr. Boldwood has talked. He would taunt you with your daily labour as if it were a disgrace to work for your living; as if every one of us—queen and princes, cabinet ministers, general officers, great sea captains, lawyers, landowners, painters, poets, musicians—do not toil, and bring forth that which we have to produce in the sweat of our brows. Granted that there are the sons of Belial, that there are among the honourable and honoured aristocracy of England a few black sheep, are there no dusky fleeces, do you think, to be found in the factory? Are there no black sheep in the mine? No idlers and malingerers battenning upon the toil of others? The warp and the woof of society are woven upon the same lines, my friends, from one end of the fabric to the other; and those who prate to you of equality prate to you of something that never has existed and never can exist. Were Cain and Abel equal before God? No; the Almighty blessed one and cursed the other. Were Jacob and Esau alike in their fate, or were the fortunes of Joseph and his brethren equal? Is Nature equal in her gifts? I stand

before you, my friends, this night, a living instance of Nature's inequality. Shall I blaspheme against my God because it has pleased Him to make me different from my fellow-men? No, I accept my burden, as other men must needs accept theirs. Be sure there is something in every shoe that pinches the wearer. What I have to do, and what we all have to do, is to make the best of the world we live in for ourselves and for each other; improving away evil gently and by degrees, not by rapid wrenches and volcanic upheavals, but in the gradual ripening of the days and years, clinging to all that was good in England's past, and discarding all that was bad; lopping off the withered branches, but zealously guarding the tree; and that I take it to be true Conservatism, and a truly Liberal Conservatism."

There was considerable applause from the Conservative minority after Lord Lashmar's speech. Boldwood sat facing the audience, his arms folded upon the back of a chair, glaring at them from under those bushy brows of his, with eyes that seemed always to shine with the same angry light: anger at fate, life, fortune—a world in which for him all things were adverse and cruel. Suddenly there arose a murmur of voices, excited voices in

the crowd just below the platform—murmurs in which he caught his own name: and then the word "fire!" Some men by the corner of the platform were talking about him, looking up at him.

He bent down and questioned one of them—"What's the matter, mate?"

"Goldwin's! You live at Goldwin's, don't you?"

"Yes!"

"Goldwin's is afire!"

The demagogue bounded from his chair, dropped off the platform, and pushed his way through the crowd, muttering as he went:

"My God! And that child—locked in her room on the fourth story——"

He clutched a man by the shoulder:

"What about this fire?" he gasped. "Is it true? Who brought the news? When?"

"Not five minutes ago; there's a lot has run off to see. There was a lot of 'em here—a lot of Goldwin's people."

Boldwood waited to hear no further, but pushed his way on to the door. The news had wrought confusion in the hall already, and the crowd was surging outwards. There was a greater excite-

ment, a fiercer fever of emotion to be had out of doors than the finest speaker could offer within. A great fire was one of the spectacles which Brumm most enjoyed.

Goldwin's was a gigantic building on the eastern outskirts of the town, on that side most remote from Lashmar Castle—a huge model lodging house, built some years before by a friend of humanity who only required nine per cent. for his capital. It was a huge caravansery, and swarmed like an anthill; for it was better than the dens and hovels of the slums in the heart of the town, inasmuch as it was wind-and-weather-proof, which they were not. The rents exacted for the rooms were high, and it was only the more prosperous of the working classes who could afford to live at Goldwin's.

Boldwood had a couple of rooms there: two little square boxes on the fourth story, one with a fireplace, the other without. He had made the room with the fireplace his little daughter's bed-chamber, while he himself slept, and for the most part lived, in the cold. There was a common kitchen at Goldwin's where the inmates could get anything cooked; and there was a common laundry where the women compared their rags and told

each other their troubles; and there was a club-room where the men smoked, and talked politics, and played dominoes—a hot-bed of advanced socialism.

To the dwellers in the slums Goldwin's seemed a lordly mansion, and to live at Goldwin's was a distinction. It was a huge quadrangular building, six stories high, with a courtyard in the centre—a monster pile of ugly yellow brick, pierced with windows all of one pattern, opening on to covered balconies with iron railings—everything straight and square, and flat and uniform. A huge cube of brickwork it looked from the distance, as seen across the level of the flattest, dreariest outskirt of Brumm; uglier than factory, or jail, or work-house. To those wealthier citizens whose prospect that huge bulk defaced, it seemed a monstrous blot upon the horizon.

The beneficent Goldwin had bought a couple of acres of waste ground for a song, a quarter of a century before; and when a great cry had gone up to heaven from the penny newspapers, about the way in which the poor of Brumm were lodged, Mr. Goldwin had stood up at a public meeting and pledged himself to build a model dwelling which should be as the workman's paradise.

While the building was in progress, Mr. Goldwin was one of the most popular men in Brumm. It was only when his house was finished, and his scale of rents made known, that his popularity began to decline. But, although the rents were high, Goldwin's was always full from roof to basement.

The meeting ended amidst confusion, and the last speeches were unheard. The news of the fire had reached the platform, and Lord Lashmar knew that the Radical leader had rushed away to see to the safety of his child. Even her ladyship's sympathies were aroused by the tragedy of the scene.

"To think that such a creature should have so much human feeling!" she exclaimed. "I hope his people will not be burnt."

She had not grasped the fact that the demagogue's "people" were comprised by one only child.

"I think, mother, if you'll allow me, I'll stay and see the end of this business after I've put you into your carriage," said Lashmar. "I can get a fly at the George to take me home."

"I'll stay with you," said Colonel Spillington.

"And I," cried Victorian.

"No, Victor, I will not have you struggling in a Brumm crowd!" exclaimed his mother; "and you, Lashmar, you would not certainly be so foolish as to trust yourself amongst those roughs."

"They would be safe enough with me," said the Colonel. "But the young one can go home with your ladyship; Lashmar and I will see it out."

Lady Lashmar remonstrated; she offered to wait at the hotel until her stepson was ready to go home with her; but to this Lashmar would not consent. He took his mother to her carriage, and saw Victorian seat himself beside her, very reluctantly. The boy was longing for an adventure; he felt that it was in him to do the work of twenty hireling firemen. The engine came tearing down the street while the carriage stood there, frightening the big bays out of their wits. The firemen looked like demons, the street boys yelped and whooped as the vision of flashing metal and dark resolute faces rushed by. And to have to turn one's back upon that fever of excitement and go home to supper with one's mother! It was hard for impetuous young Eton, strong in the overweening confidence of youth. The barouche drove away through the summer

night, drove away from the smoke and grime—towards fields and dewy hills and flowery hedgerows. Lashmar and the Colonel got into a hansom cab—they have had hansoms in Brumm for the last twenty years—and told the driver to go to Goldwin's as fast as he could pelt. Driver and horse were both excited, and rattled off at a tremendous pace.

There were half-a-dozen streets, and an arid waste of market gardens and ground newly plotted out for building, to be traversed before they reached the scene of the fire; unmade roads, stretching to the right and the left, ghost-like in the moonlight—here a factory, and there a shabby-genteel terrace of new houses, and anon a row of allotment gardens; but straight in front of them they saw Goldwin's, like the fiery pillar in the desert—a monstrous pile, vomiting smoke and flame.

"The fire must have gained ground terribly before the engines arrived," said Lashmar, leaning forward over the doors of the cab, with his eyes intent upon that flaming bulk yonder.

"Engines never are in time to do any substantial good," answered Spillington. "How lucky the fire did not happen in the middle of the

night. People would be up and about, and able to help themselves."

"But the children," cried Lashmar, almost with a moan of anguish. "The little children, left alone in that tower of Babel. The careless young mothers roaming the streets; the fathers listening to Boldwood. Perhaps you don't know the kind of mothers that are made out of factory girls? God help the little children! I'll warrant there were dozens of them left to take care of themselves in that big house to-night!"

"That's a horrible idea," muttered the Colonel; and he felt that there was only too much ground for Lashmar's fear.

They were in front of the house by this time—a dense crowd between them and the building.

"Wait!" said Lashmar to the cabman as he alighted, and he and Spillington pushed their way through the mob.

It was a moment of breathless excitement. The engines were on the other side of the building; the fire-escapes were in full action; but they could not be everywhere. Lashmar had conjectured rightly. There was a swarm of children in that human hive: and the mothers were rushing

about distractedly, pleading to the firemen, to the crowd, to the empty air even, to save their little ones—pointing wildly to windows: there, there, that one, on the fifth floor, the seventh from the end, that one by the broken rain-pipe—oh! curses on these tall houses, where the children could be roasted alive, and no help possible! The fire had broken out suddenly, with an astounding fury. It was all the work of an hour; but the mischief had been slowly working for long silent days and nights. The brick-work of that huge shaft which went up from the laundry—the common chimney of kitchen, laundry, and club-room—had been red-hot, and none knew. They had only felt the warmth an annoyance in the hot summer nights. No one had guessed that there was danger; and to-night, at ten o'clock, the skirting of one of the rooms next the chimney had burst into flame, and then another, and then another, till a great column of flame was rushing up to heaven through the middle of the house—that central block upon which the initials of William Goldwin, the people's benefactor, stood out boldly above a great black-faced clock, with white metal hands; a clock that had ticked off the brief intervals of rest to many a

toiler, but which would never tick again for dead or living, since the metal that had composed its works was running down the brick-work in a molten stream like quicksilver.

Yes; screams, and clasped hands, and dishevelled hair were the livery of all those careless young mothers to-night. Locked in, their children had all been locked in! To hide the lucifers, and to lock the door, that had been the maternal idea of carefulness. Locked in—locked in one of those pigeon-holes in that great barrack through which the flames were roaring.

While the mothers were rushing to and fro, threading the crowd, falling into the arms of strangers to sob out their woe, shrieking in wildest hysteria, or standing white and dumb waiting for Fate to strike, there was one father who was acting vigorously for himself, asking help from no man.

"Look at him!" gasped the crowd, as Jonathan Boldwood's huge form scaled the iron balconies, clambered and swung himself from one point of vantage to another, mounting higher and higher, showing a dark moving blotch against the red light that shone all over the building, as it had been the palace of the setting sun. "Look

at him! 'There's a man for you, a man with the heart of a lion. His little girl is up in one o' them rooms—one o' the toppest. The firemen and the 'scapes are all t'other side o' the building. God help him! He'll be suffocated before he gets to that top-room!"

This was about the gist of what the crowd said, in short gasps of speech, loquacious, excited, pitying but impotent to help, around and about Lord Lashmar. Neither his gentle blood nor his crooked back attracted any attention in that surging mass of anxious humanity. All distinctions were for the time blotted out. The strong human instinct prevailed over all class differences and conventionalities. The hearts of Radical and Tory throbbed in perfect unison, accelerated by pity and terror.

"He'll do it!" roared the crowd, and Lashmar's memory went back to that other crowd roaring on the Surrey shore, roaring from the flat swamps of Chiswick yonder, two voices meeting and blending across the river. "He'll do it!" cried the crowd, watching that bulky figure—a figure that had lost the liveness of athletic youth, and which pulled itself heavily, with the strength of a giant, slowly, laboriously, from iron rail to

iron rail, bridging the distance with evident difficulty. "He'll do it!" and Lashmar remembered the dark face bent over the oar; the resolute under jaw and beetle brow, the dark, cropped hair and bull neck. He fancied he could see the face now, turned towards the burning building, lurid in the reflected light.

"One story more, and he's there!" cried the crowd.

One more rail to grasp, one last effort to swing himself to the higher level; but before he could grasp the rail a great wave of flame and smoke rushed out from the shattered windows in front of him, poured over him like black water, and wrapped him in Egyptian darkness—darkness flecked with arrows of flame. Then there arose a groan as of Samson when the pillars yielded and the roof fell—the groan of a despairing Titan. The crowd reeled backward with a shuddering recoil, and that bulky figure fell in their midst, almost at Lashmar's feet.

There was no help, no hope. The demagogue's neck was broken. He expired without a murmur.

CHAPTER IV.

“SO WOE-BEGONE A THING WAS SHE.”

WHILE the mob surrounded the dead man, talking over him, lamenting him, waiting for medical help, for a stretcher to carry that motionless bulk of humanity away, Lashmar had slipped off his coat, flung it to the remonstrant Colonel Spillington, and had begun to climb the iron balconies, just as Boldwood had climbed, but at a greater disadvantage, for the smoke and flame had intensified with every moment; window after window had shivered, and vomited fire. The lookers-on, those who were not too absorbed by their thoughts of the dead to watch the living, gave a cry of horror—horror at the madness of such an attempt.

But in a few minutes those spectators understood that this climber was of a different calibre from Boldwood. This slight, slim form was the figure of a trained athlete. Those long lithe arms held on to the balconies, and wreathed them-

selves about the iron columns with the suppleness and the tenacity of a serpent. Could this be the man with the crooked back, who had been standing in the front of the crowd just now, silent, watchful?

Some of them recognised him by that marred spine, knew him to be Lord Lashmar, a chronic invalid, a weakling. Others who knew better knew that he had trained himself to the highest feats of athleticism, that he had built a gymnasium at Lashmar Castle, and that he had exercised his body with all the devotion of a Greek wrestler, or a Roman gladiator. To these it was no surprise to see the hunchback's long lean arms lift him from balcony to balcony, to see that well-shaped head thrown back to escape the suffocating rush of smoke and fiery dust, to see railing after railing gained, as that stunted figure mounted higher, diminishing almost to a vanishing point. Yes, *he* will do it! That which Jonathan Boldwood—deteriorated by intemperate habits and a sedentary life, hindered by his own bulk—had been unable to accomplish, this deformed lordling would do. Would do? He had done it. That sinuous right arm was wreathed round the iron column between the fourth story

and the balcony above. A mighty cheer swelled from the throats of the crowd—a cheer that was half a sob.

“Bring round the fire-escapes,” shouted one and there was a rush to the other side of the building. Lives were being saved there as fast as the firemen could save them—young children, helpless old people, sick, and maimed. But here was a life more precious than them all—the life of the deliverer, the hero, the Hercules who had entered himself, a voluntary combatant, in a hand-to-hand fight with death.

Would he perish in his generous endeavour? That was the awful doubt which thrilled every heart in that watching crowd. Even Rachel weeping for her children, stilled her wailings for the moment, to look up with strained eyes and awe-stricken face towards that upper balcony within which the deliverer had disappeared. What fate awaited him in the darkness and the fire? Was the room he had entered sound and whole, or was it but the mouth of a fiery pit? Was that generous heart stilled in death, even while they watched and waited?

No; just as the fire-escape appeared round the corner of the building, swaying to and fro as

the firemen and the crowd steered it along, just as succour drew near, that slim figure in the white shirt sleeves flashed out again amidst the smoke. Lord Lashmar was standing in that fourth floor balcony with a child in his arms. He had but to wait the adjustment of the escape, to guard himself and his living burden from the flames, and all the rest was easy.

Five, ten minutes of supreme anxiety, and all was over. Lashmar was standing among the crowd with Boldwood's five-year-old daughter in his arms, a small, thin figure in a little white nightgown, a sallow, wizened little face, with great goblin eyes.

"God bless you, sir; God bless you, my lord."

The men clasped him by the hand, the women hung about him, and kissed those wounded hands of his, raw and bleeding, scratched and scorched and torn, and smelling of smoke and fire. No thought of Radical or Conservative now; no fierce hatred of landowner and aristocrat. The great heart of the crowd was stirred with one divine impulse, made up of love, pity, tenderness—unselfish delight in a generous act nobly done.

"By Jove, Lashmar, I thought you were a dead man!" cried Colonel Spillington. "You

must be hurt, surely; dangerously hurt perhaps," he added, running his hand over the young man's shoulder and arm, as if in search of broken bones.

"A few scratches more or less," answered Lashmar quietly; and then he added to the crowd: "Don't make such a fuss, my good friends; I'm sure there isn't one of you that wouldn't have done as much."

He made his way through the throng towards the farther side of the broad barren road where he had left the cab, with the rescued child still in his arms, clinging to him, scared and pale, with those wide goblin eyes of hers. Spillington followed him closely.

"What are you going to do with the child?" he asked. "She'll have to go to the Union, I suppose, poor little soul!"

"She'll have to go to no such place," answered Lashmar; "she is going to my house."

"You mean to take Boldwood's child to Lashmar Castle?" asked Spillington, astounded.

"Why not? I should take a stray dog home. Why should I draw the line at a stray child?"

"Well, there's a considerable difference, I believe, though you may not see it. To take a Ra-

dical orphan upon one's hands is rather a serious business. If I were you I should drive straight to the Union, and deposit this poor little thing with the matron; much the best thing you can do for her."

"I have saved her out of the fire, I am not going to throw her back into it," answered Lashmar resolutely. "She is mine, jetsam and flotsam from the great ship Fate; my prize, my portion. She shall never cross the threshold of a work-house while I have power to prevent it."

They were in the cab by this time. Lashmar had wrapped his coat round the child, and was sitting in his shirt-sleeves. He told the man to drive to the George, the chief hotel in Brumm, the hotel patronised by the county people, when they gladdened the great grimy town with their superior presence. It was an old-fashioned hotel, with a wide archway, and a spacious courtyard, and a magpie in a cage by the little low doorway of the bar. It had been an old-established hotel in the coaching days, before ever Brumm had arisen in its grimy might as a manufacturing town.

Lord Lashmar was known and honoured at the George. The sleepy waiters stifled their

yawns, and bowed themselves before him. The landlady, who had lingered over her supper in the snug little parlour behind the bar, waiting up to hear the latest news of the fire, came bustling out to see if she could be of any use to his lordship.

She almost shrieked at the sight of the child looking round with frightened eyes; such a poor little pinched, sallow countenance, so wizened, so unchildlike. The mistress of the George thought she had never seen an uglier brat.

"Oh! my Lord, where did you pick her up? Is she one of the children from Goldwin's?"

"She is Boldwood's child, and his lordship risked his life to save her," answered Spillington. "What will you have, Lashmar, by way of pick-me-up? A brandy-and-soda—a tumbler of champagne, eh? You must have something!"

"I'll take some soda, with a dash of brandy if you like," said Lashmar. "Do you think you could lend me a shawl to wrap up this little one, Mrs. Sycamour?" he asked the obsequious landlady; "and do you think you could get me a pair of horses to take us back to Lashmar? Her ladyship will be anxious till she sees us all safe at home."

"Certainly, my Lord" — and Mrs. Sycamour rang a bell: "Tell Joe to get the landau and the grays ready directly. And, Mary, run and fetch one of my shawls. The warm knitted one in the bottom drawer, you know, child. Don't stand staring like a simpleton."

Mary was gazing at the dark-eyed child in Lord Lashmar's arms. A child in a nightgown was a curious kind of thing for a young nobleman to carry about with him at midnight.

"Daddy!" cried the little girl piteously, and the great dark eyes began to fill with tears. "Where's daddy? I want my daddy."

Lashmar looked at her helplessly. What could he say to soothe or console, without uttering a deliberate lie? The little one's breast began to heave with sobs.

"Daddy!" she cried, "where's daddy? Was he burnt in the fire—was he hurt? Let me go to daddy."

"By-and-by," murmured Lashmar, feebly; "by-and-by, dear child. Will you give her a little milk and a biscuit, Mrs. Sycamour? The poor little thing may be hungry."

"Poor little dear," said the landlady. "Have

a nice cake, pet? Mary, bring me a glass of milk, and a sponge cake."

But when the motherly soul attempted to take the child in her arms, the little one scowled and clung tighter to Lashmar.

"Take me to daddy," she pleaded, frowning darkly at Mrs. Sycamour's friendly face, rejecting all tenderness from that source.

"Upon my soul, Lord Lashmar, this is too much of a good thing," cried Spillington, who had finished his brandy-and-soda, and was waxing impatient to be gone. For a man who had not dined this indefinite postponement of supper was a trial. "You had better let our good friend here take charge of the brat for to-night, and hand her over to the proper authorities to-morrow. I never saw such a goblin. Why, she's as dark as Erebus. There must have been a dip of the tar-brush somewhere."

"It's the gipsy blood, sir; everybody says that Boldwood's wife was a gipsy."

"Is that carriage ready," asked Lashmar.

The landlady blew down a speaking-tube which communicated with the stables. Mysterious sounds followed, as of voices from spirit land.

"In five minutes, my Lord."

Mary—no less a person than the head chambermaid—had brought the milk and cake by this time, and Lashmar tried to coax the child to eat and drink. In vain! She only wept, and pushed aside his gentle hand.

"Where's my daddy?" she asked hopelessly.

Lashmar huddled her up in the shawl, and carried her off to the landau, one of those capacious vehicles peculiar to country inns, and seemingly built to hold eight inside. It was very leathery, but not uncomfortable. Colonel Spillington buttoned his light overcoat across his chest, and composed himself in a corner.

"If that brat will only let me sleep, now," he thought, and Providence was kind to him, for before they had left the stones of Brumm far behind them Boldwood's daughter had sobbed herself to sleep upon Lord Lashmar's breast, and the Colonel was able to snore in peace.

Not once did slumber visit Lashmar's eyes during that long drive under the summer stars. He was thinking of that dead face, convulsed by the shock that snapped the cervical vertebræ and crushed one side of the skull—that dark powerful face in which every line indicated the double forces of a strong mind in a strong body. And

this man who had been so potent an influence in that great hive of workers yonder, this daring speaker, this audacious thinker, the man who blasphemed his Maker and hated his more fortunate fellow-man, was gone for ever—a mere lump of clay now, to be buried out of sight, and forgotten.

All the Radicals and Freethinkers of Brumm would deplore the agitator: but perhaps there was only this one helpless little being, this five-year-old child, to mourn for the man.

And he had been a gentleman once! What dark experiences, what temptations, errors, misfortunes, lay between that triumphant hour of the Oxford undergraduate, and the dreadful death of the Brumm brass-worker? Lashmar's reading had taught him that most men's misfortunes are in some degree of their own work: and he could but think that this brass-worker must have sinned against God or society before he took to himself the fustian coat and the fustian creed of the Brumm demagogue.

It was past one o'clock when the grays from the George trotted along the avenue that led to Lashmar Castle. The river was gleaming in the

starlight, mysterious, beautiful, between its rushy banks, its leaning willows; and the casements of the castle gleamed also, with an earthlier radiance, and the low Gothic doors stood open under the massive stone porch, revealing the lighted hall within. Lady Lashmar and Victorian came out of the white parlour as the carriage stopped.

"My dear Colonel, I thought you were never coming back!" she exclaimed. "How dreadfully you must want your supper;" and then starting at sight of Lashmar's burden—the little figure muffled in a red fleecy shawl—she exclaimed, "Why Lashmar, what in Heaven's name have you there?"

"A child, madam; an imp of darkness: the spawn of the demagogue—Boldwood's child, rescued from the flames by this young hero of yours. By Jove, Lady Lashmar, you have reason to be proud of your son," said the Colonel, collecting his senses with an effort, for he had been in the middle of his first and soundest sleep when the carriage pulled up.

"*You* rescued Boldwood's child!" cried her ladyship, looking at Lashmar's smoke-grimed face, and from his face downward to his nether gar-

ments, which were torn and frayed at the knees, one knee rent across, and showing blood-stains on the light summer cloth. "But how?"

"By climbing to the top of a four-story building—one of the most heroic acts I ever saw anywhere, except before the walls of a hill fort," answered the Colonel. "It's a wonder I've brought him back to you alive, Lady Lashmar."

"The Lashmars were always brave!" she said gravely; and then, with a certain formality which chilled the Colonel's soul, she kissed her stepson on the forehead.

"You had no right to risk your life for a demagogue's brat," she said. "Why could not Mr. Boldwood rescue his child himself?"

"He did his damndest, I beg pardon, he did his uttermost, poor beggar, and was killed in the attempt," said the Colonel.

"Boldwood killed?"

"Yes; he will trouble us no more, mother. He is gone—and this is his orphan daughter."

"But why in mercy's name did you bring her here? Why not at once hand her over to the proper people?"

"That was precisely my idea," said the Colonel, longing for his supper.

The white parlour looked so bright and home-like and cheery, in the light of a large swinging colza lamp, under a yellow umbrella-shaped shade. The table was loaded with good things. The red Bordeaux wine glowed in thinnest Venetian flasks. Butler and footman were in attendance by the side-board, and there was an odour of savoury viands from a chafing-dish, which encouraged the Colonel with the hope of at least a hot cutlet or sweet-bread, if this discussion about the beggar's brat in Lashmar's arms would only come to a close.

"Pray, who are the proper people to whom a five-year-old orphan should be handed over?" asked Lashmar deliberately.

"Why, the matron at the Union would of course be the proper person to take care of her."

"Exactly what I told Lord Lashmar," said the Colonel.

"And you would have her begin her life in a workhouse—be reared and educated as a pauper?"

"And properly trained for domestic service," pursued her ladyship; "the very best career for any young woman. Do you know, Colonel Spillington, that I pay my third and fourth housemaids

twenty pounds a-year, which their innumerable perquisites must increase to thirty. The very best and most comfortable career for any young woman, Lashmar; and our workhouses nowadays are so thoroughly well administered that I have not the least objection to take a servant from the pauper class. Some of our best girls have come from the Union."

"This child will not go to the Union while I live," answered Lashmar, with quiet determination. "Are any of the women up, Longley?"

"Only her ladyship's maids, my Lord."

Her ladyship had two personal attendants. She required very little service from them, for she was a woman of active habits, and by no means self-indulgent. But this dual service was an appanage of her state; it was her pride not her luxuriousness which demanded to be waited upon.

"Will you allow me to ask a favour of Barker?" asked Lord Lashmar.

"Certainly!"

Barker was the second and homelier maid. A homely-looking person of five-and-thirty, who lighted the candles and arranged the furniture—

sometimes even condescended so far as to use a duster—in Lady Lashmar's private apartments.

Barker was summoned, and came sleepy but smiling to await her ladyship's orders.

"I believe his lordship wishes you to take care of a child, Barker," said Lady Lashmar. "You will have to put it in your own bed for to-night, I suppose, after you have given it a hot bath. You had better cut its hair, too, as close as you possibly can."

"The child has not had scarlet fever, mother."

"Who knows? Poor people are always having fevers. At any rate, it is most likely very dirty. Bathe it and crop it, Barker, I beg."

The shawl fell off as Lashmar handed the child to Barker, and the little white nightgown and little bare feet were the best answer to her ladyship's sweeping conclusion. Both were spotlessly clean.

"What an ugly child!" cried Lady Lashmar; and then seeing Colonel Spillington standing forlorn, gazing at the supper table yonder, she took pity upon him.

"Take the child away, and make her as comfortable as you can, Barker," she said. "And

now let me give you both some supper. Poor creatures, you must be dreadfully hungry!"

"I confess to feeling a vacuum," said the Colonel, growing cheerful, as he seated himself at the table and unfolded his napkin, looking about him with an interested air.

Lobster mayonnaise, chicken aspic, Russian salad with plenty of stuffed olives—hum, ha, pretty tiny kickshaws—and the footman put a hot cutlet, *à l'Indienne*, before him; while the butler unwired a bottle of De Lossey's dry champagne. Not so bad after all.

"Lashmar, did you really climb a four-story balcony? I know Goldwin's—iron balconies all the way up, like a gridiron. I daresay I could do it myself; but it must have been deuced difficult. I envy you!"

"I hope you may never have the opportunity or the inclination to attempt anything half so wild," said Lady Lashmar, in a biting voice.

It was the first time she had given utterance to her exasperation; but the pallor of her fine features, the angry light in her eyes, had indicated the state of her feelings from the moment she had seen Boldwood's child in her stepson's arms. She was wise enough to hold her peace,

however. Lashmar Castle was the house of Lord Lashmar, and she, omnipotent although she seemed to the household and the neighbours, was only there on sufferance. If Lashmar chose to bring a pauper brat into the castle, to rear her there, as he might any other domestic pet, it was not for her ladyship to interfere. This consciousness of her own impotence intensified her displeasure.

"Victor, you ought to have been in bed hours ago!" she exclaimed. "Good-night, Colonel Spillington, or good morning rather. I will leave you and Lashmar to take care of each other."

She shook hands with the Colonel, kissed her stepson's brow, and went away with her arm round her boy's neck.

"What a glorious fellow Lashmar is!" said Victorian, as he and his mother went upstairs. "So quiet, so unassuming, and so plucky. I wish—I wish his back was as straight as other people's, poor chap! He bears his burden so well."

"I wish he were sane," retorted her ladyship, "and then he would not have brought home that Radical's imp."

“Oh! but if he likes to provide for the little thing, send her to some cheap school, or some institution— orphanage— don’t you know; he is rich enough to indulge his benevolence.”

Lord Lashmar did not send the Radical’s child to a cheap school; nor did he plague the souls of his friends by canvassing for votes in order to get Stella Boldwood elected as an inmate of some stately orphanage, supported by voluntary contributions, and smiled upon by princes and princesses. Stella was not destined to dwell in one of those vast edifices which philanthropy has reared for the shelter of the friendless and the orphan. It was Stella’s fate to be reared in the home of an English nobleman, and to become accustomed to all those luxuries and elegancies which are, as it were, the surrounding atmosphere of those born in the purple.

It was in vain that the great Lady Pitland’s daughter protested against her stepson’s folly in adopting a pauper’s brat, and hinted that the cloven foot of Socialism showed itself in the act. It was in vain that she shuddered at the degradation of those ancestral halls. Lashmar was rock. He was one of those quiet, undemonstrative young men who make up their minds slowly, and who

can never be argued or cajoled into the relinquishment of a settled purpose.

"I made up my mind as we drove home last night, mother," said Lashmar, gently, gravely, resolutely, in a tone which her ladyship knew only too well. "Spillington and the child were both asleep. I had ample time for reflection; and I thought the matter out thoroughly. I mean to adopt Boldwood's child, and to bring her up as my own daughter. There are many reasons in favour of my project; there is not one that I can discover against it. I have long wished for something to love, some young unschooled creature, that should be dependent upon me, and should grow up at my feet, as it were. I am very fond of Victorian; but he can seldom be my companion. He has his education to occupy him now; he will have his career to think of by-and-by. But a friendless little girl, whom I can train and educate into companionship, will afford me just the kind of solace, just the kind of innocent sympathy, which I have sighed for. A little more than a dog, a little less than an equal."

"You will find the creature a horrible nuisance before you have done with her. If you should think of marrying, for instance."

"I shall never marry, never have children of my own. By the time this girl has grown up I shall be declining into the vale of years. She will be my link with the future. I have been told lately—you remember my long chat with Sir William Spenser the last time he came down to see me—that in spite of my miserable health I may live to be an old man."

Lady Lashmar winced palpably; but she was sitting at some distance from her stepson, and her face was turned to the window, so he did not see that startled look of keenest pain. She had been telling herself for years past that Hubert Lashmar could not make old bones—that it could only be a question of a few years more or less before her son would fill his place—and now to be told that the great physician, Sir William Spenser, had declared that Lashmar might creep on in this half-life of his to old age! It was a hard thing to be told this, suddenly, in that cool, calm voice of her stepson's. She knew that he was the soul of truth, incapable of misrepresentation or exaggeration upon any subject whatever.

"And you look to the child of such a man as Boldwood to be your friend and companion in after years—the mongrel of a gipsy and a dema-

gogue!" exclaimed Lady Lashmar, unable to control her temper. "You make no allowance for hereditary instincts."

"I believe more in association and education than in hereditary instinct. The child has a fine broad forehead, bright well-opened eyes, sensitive nostrils, thin lips, delicate chin—not at all a bad subject to work upon."

"I really think she is the ugliest child I ever beheld," said Lady Lashmar, rapping the table with an elephant's tusk paper-knife. "How you, who pretend to worship ideal beauty, can be interested in such a little monster is more than I can understand."

"She is small and brown, but I don't think her ugly. Her eyes shone like stars last night. It is my idea that she will grow up a very interesting woman."

"You have such odd ideas!"

"Don't be angry, mother," pleaded Lashmar with wondrous gentleness. "Granted that I am somewhat eccentric—Nature has made me in a mould of her own, you see—but, after all, I have very few whims. And I promise you that this last caprice of mine shall give you no trouble. The child shall live in this house; but you need

hardly be aware of her existence. All she will want will be a couple of rooms on the top story, where we have a score of rooms that only serve as a rat-warren."

"Mice, not rats," protested her ladyship.

"Well, we'll call them mice. It sounds pleasanter; only they are the biggest breed I ever saw, and the noisiest. However, my *protégée* will help to scare away the mice. I shall engage a maid for her, and arrange a couple of rooms for her and her maid, those two pretty rooms in the south-west tower for instance. She will live on that top floor, have her meals there, plague no one; and when I want her company in my study I can have her brought down to me as I would any other plaything. You may meet her on the stairs or in the corridor occasionally. But that is about the utmost you need see of her."

"This is your house, Lashmar. If you choose to have it infested by the spawn of Socialism it is not for me to gainsay you."

"I hope the day may come when you will be reconciled to my adopted daughter; when she may perhaps be a comfort to you as well as to me."

"Never, Lashmar! I can tolerate her existence in the house out of deference to you. I should have to submit if you took it into your head to keep a rattlesnake; but I have none of your Utopian ideas; and I have not the least doubt that you will have cause to repent your generous folly before you and your *protégée* are three years older."

"We will compare notes three years hence, and I hope I shall convince you that you were mistaken," said Lashmar, with perfect good temper. "And now, mother, have you any young woman on your list who would make a good maid for Stella?"

"There is Barker's niece; her father is in the gardens, don't you know. Barker's niece has been wanting to come here for the last six months."

"I should like to see Barker's niece this afternoon."

Lady Lashmar sighed, and gave orders in accordance with her step-son's wish. She had not seen the obnoxious orphan since the previous night. The child had been in Barker's care, and had been provided for in the remoteness of the upper servants' apartments. She had been taken

to Lord Lashmar, and had spent half-an-hour in his study, before breakfast.

The intruder did not take kindly to her new life. Again and again, with piteous tears, and childish unreasoning iteration, she entreated to be taken to her father. "Where is daddy? Take me to daddy!" that was the burden of her cries. And Lashmar, albeit philosophical and strong-minded in most things, could not find it in his heart to tell this orphan child the hard and bitter truth. He could not bring himself to crush her with the word "never." Childhood so soon learns the meaning of that fatal word. So with weak tenderness he took the little girl upon his lap, and drew her to his breast, and told her that she should see her father again, some day.

"To-day? Now?" she questioned.

"No, dear; not now—not to-day. He has gone on a long journey."

"To London?" she asked.

"A longer journey than that."

"Where?"

"To a beautiful country. You shall go there some day, and you shall be with him again."

"Let me go now."

"No, dear; not yet."

"But I *will* go," cried the child, scrambling off Lashmar's lap, and running towards the door.

Lashmar followed and stopped her; she cried, and stormed, and struggled with him.

"I want to go to my daddy; I will go to my daddy."

He was a quarter of an hour soothing her, and arguing with her. By the end of that time he had begun to exercise a certain influence over her; she was content to sit on his knee, gazing at him with those great dark eyes—star-like eyes, as he had called them. She listened, and seemed comforted.

"Tell me your name, little one," he asked.

"Stella."

"Stella! That is a very pretty name."

"It means a star!" said the child. "Daddy told me."

"Will you be my star? Will you live with me in this house, and play in those gardens out there, and go in my boat on the river?"

The little one craned her neck and looked out of the broad Tudor window at the flower garden and the green slopes of the park, and the bright blue water in the valley yonder. It was a lovely landscape—passing lovely after the arid purlieus

of Brumm, to which those young eyes had grown accustomed.

"No," said the little one firmly, after she had contemplated that delicious picture for some moments. "I don't want to live with you, I want to live with my daddy."

And then with a divinity of patience, with that exquisite gentleness which is a peculiar attribute of those who love little children, Lashmar explained how the journey on which daddy had gone must needs last for a long time, how summer and winter must pass before he could come back, or Stella go to him; but how they should meet in the days to come.

"And you will leave off crying, and be very good, for his sake, won't you, Stella?" pleaded Lashmar. "Fathers are unhappy when they hear that their children have been naughty. You will be good, and you will try to love me, won't you, Stella, for daddy's sake?"

The child made a supreme effort over her childish heart, choked her sobs and dried her tears, and trotted by Lashmar's side to the gardens, and across the dewy park to the river. He took her in his boat, and rowed about with her for half-an-hour or so, and took her back to the castle

with a faint bloom in her sallow cheeks, and a fine appetite for breakfast, as Barker informed him afterwards.

He saw Barker's niece after luncheon, and found her a buxom, chubby-cheeked young woman with a fine honest countenance; so he engaged her at once to be Stella's special attendant.

The little girl was to be known only as Stella. That obnoxious name Boldwood were well forgotten. And then with Barker for his aid and counsellor, Lord Lashmar ordered the arrangement of those two rooms in the south-west tower, remote from the end of the castle where Lady Lashmar's sumptuous apartments were situated, and on a higher floor; so that the chances of the young voice or the young presence obtruding themselves on her ladyship were minimised.

One of the two rooms was to be furnished as a sitting-room; the other and inner chamber was to contain two beds, for nurse and child. There was a plethora of substantial old-fashioned furniture upon this upper floor; so the re-furnishing of the room was only a matter of adjustment. The view from these tower-chambers was exquisite. A wide expanse of wooded park and winding river bounded by low hills, and in the distance

the rustic village of Avondale, with red-tiled roofs, and low thatched cottages, and quaint variety of gables, and Norman church tower, smiling amidst rich pastures, glassing its simple beauties in the blue bright river. For a rural English Midland landscape nothing could be prettier.

"She ought to thrive and flourish in such a bower as this," thought Lashmar, and then he gave Barker's niece—in future to be known as Betsy—some broad general instructions as to the bringing up of childhood upon enlightened principles—cold water, fresh air, regular meals, and good and ample food being the chief points. And to the elder Barker he entrusted the task of procuring the child an outfit. She might be driven over to Brumm that afternoon he suggested, and could make all her purchases before the shops were shut, if her ladyship would kindly dispense with her services for a few hours.

"I think I can manage to arrange that with Celestine," said Barker.

Celestine was the Parisian and superior maid who re-arranged Mrs. Monsoon's gowns, and repaired her ladyship's priceless laces.

"Do, like a good soul; and be sure you thank the coachman's wife for lending the little one

clothes for to-day. You will please buy everything of the best, but of the simplest. When she is a year or two older I may choose her frocks myself, perhaps. For the present I should like her to be dressed always in some cream-coloured stuff—some kind of soft woollen material, and then she need have very few undergarments, and no weight of clothing to impede her movements."

"Lord a 'mercy, what a mollycoddle!" thought Barker, and then she ventured a remonstrance on economical grounds.

"Cream colour so soon gets dirty, my Lord," she said; "don't you think now that a neat lilac print, a small pattern, and rather dark, would be better?"

"Good heavens, no! Do you suppose I want her to look like a workhouse child? I want her to brighten the gardens by her presence, like a beautiful human butterfly."

"She is such a plain child, my Lord. She will never pay for dress."

"I will have her in cream colour," said Lashmar, decisively; "and you can buy her half-a-dozen sashes, the broadest you can get—some scarlet and some pale blue. I will write you a

cheque for twenty or thirty pounds before you go. Buy everything at Ponsford's, where her ladyship deals."

"The dearest shop in Brumm, my Lord."

"The dearest shops are apt to be the cheapest in the long run."

"Ten pounds ought to be ample, even at Ponsford's," said Barker. "I shall only have to buy materials, for Betsy is very clever with her needle, and she will make all the little frocks and things."

Betsy grinned, and reddened at this praise.

"What a capital Betsy!" exclaimed Lashmar. "I shall make the cheque twenty, and be sure you buy soft and fine stuffs; I want my little girl to look pretty."

"That she will never do, my Lord," answered Barker with conviction; "but me and Betsy will do our best to make her look nice."

CHAPTER V.

"BY DEGREES THE HUMAN BLOSSOM BLOWS."

THE inquest upon Jonathan Boldwood was held next day, and Lord Lashmar was present. There were plenty of witnesses ready to describe his fall, had more than one voice been necessary. The firemen were exempted from all blame; they had been working nobly on the other side of the building—not one inhabitant had perished in that great populous hive. The one fatal accident had been the death of the father in his endeavour to rescue his child.

No one came forward out of Boldwood's past life to tell what the man had been, or to testify to their interest in him. When the coroner asked what had been done with the child, Lord Lashmar stepped forward and said that he had adopted her, and would hold himself responsible for her future welfare.

"I don't think there is anyone who will dispute that privilege with you, my Lord," said the

coroner. "I hope the child will grow up to be grateful to you for your noble conduct in saving her life."

There was a murmur of applause in the room as Lord Lashmar withdrew; but before he left the tavern where the inquest had been held, he told the authorities that he would pay for a decent funeral, and a grave in the cemetery outside Brumm. It was his particular desire that Boldwood should not be buried by the parish.

He attended the funeral in person two days afterwards, by no means an agreeable duty, since all the rabble of Brumm turned out to do honour to their favourite agitator. But Lashmar told himself that the day would come when Stella would question him about her father's burial, would ask to be taken to her father's grave: and he wanted to be able to tell her that he had stood beside that grave while the clods of earth were cast upon the coffin, while the words of promise and of hope were spoken.

So Lashmar stood beside the parson as he shuffled over those sublime words, and his was the first hand that dropped flowers—summer's whitest roses—upon the demagogue's coffin. The crowd pressed forward to stare down into the

grave, and many a grimy hand scattered hedge-row wildlings and humble cottage flowers on the lid of the huge oak coffin. There were women among the crowd who wept, women who had never heard the orator, but who felt as if they had lost a friend. Had he not pleaded the cause of the poor against the rich? Had he not given voice to that deep undertone of discontent which had been growing stronger day by day with the advance of education.

The last of the summer roses had bloomed and faded long before Stella ceased from piteous entreaties to be taken to her daddy. She was gentle and obedient to her benefactor; was gradually growing attached to him. She took pleasure in his society, loved the river and the gardens, the meadows and flowery banks, the picture books in the library, where she used to sit upon the floor quietly turning the leaves of an illustrated volume, while Lashmar read or wrote, undisturbed by her presence. She thrived in Betsy Barker's care, and was happy in the comfort and the brightness of her new life; but young as she was she did not forget. A cloud would come over her face in the midst of her happiness, and the tears would roll down her

cheeks as she asked, "Will daddy *never* come?" Sometimes Lashmar regretted that he had not told her the truth at the very first, and questioned his own wisdom in not having striven to make her young mind comprehend the meaning of that dreadful word "death." But having deceived her so long he could not undeceive her now. He could but talk in his vague poetic way of that bright and beautiful country in which they were all to dwell together some day.

Once she asked the name of that distant land, and he told her it was Jerusalem the Golden.

Never did she see a stranger in the house or the gardens without running up to him, looking up in his face interrogatively, lest by any chance this should be "daddy" come back to her unawares. The vision of a tall man, with broad shoulders, resulted inevitably in bitterest disappointment. The figure seen from a distance, perchance, had looked so like daddy, she had run to him, and caught hold of his coat-tails calling him by that dear name. And, oh! the agony of seeing an unfamiliar face, looking wonderingly down at her!

She had cried herself to sleep more than once after such a disappointment as this.

She was a very intelligent child, grave beyond her years, full of serious thoughts and curious questionings—a young mind alive with wonder. She wanted to know about the sun and moon and stars, the earth, and all creatures that dwell thereon. Those picture books afforded perpetual subjects for wonder. They were the stepping-stones to knowledge of all things great and small, from the relics of Agamemnon's tomb to the last discovery about ants or aphids. Lashmar was infinitely patient with this human plaything of his. He would lay aside Plato to answer Stella's childish questioning, to explain a picture, to tell her a story. He, to whom books were life itself—the charm and rapture of existence—would shut his best-loved author, and devote himself for an hour at a time to the task of satisfying this eager young mind, impatient with the intensity of its desire for knowledge.

Boldwood had taught his child a great deal, had talked to her of subjects far beyond her years. He had taught her as a man of large brain and lazy habits would be likely to teach. He had taken her on his lap and talked to her at random, roaming from subject to subject; now telling her some legend of the old Greek fairyland, and now

some strange fact about the manners and customs of crocodiles. There was one subject which he had never touched upon—he had told her nothing about her God. It was left for Lashmar to teach her to pray. That first simple form of prayer which he had learnt years ago from his nursery governess came back to his memory one evening when the child was bidding him good-night in the summer dusk.

“Stella, I hope you say your prayers beside your little bed, every night and morning,” he said.

“What are prayers?” she asked. “Betsy said I ought to say my prayers; but I don’t know what it means.”

“Did daddy never teach you to pray, Stella?”

She shook her head.

“If it was good he would have taught me,” she said; “he was always good to Stella.”

“Prayer is good for all of us, dear. Daddy may have thought you too young to pray—too young to understand about the God who created you and all of us, and Whom we all ought to love and to fear.”

“Daddy said there was no God; he said only fools believed in God.”

"My little girl, if we want to be happy we must have something higher and better than ourselves to look up to. We want the consciousness of a friend and protector watching over us and caring for us. Happily most of us have that consciousness: it is born with us, a part of our being; takes strange and various forms in different lands, but is always the same instinct—a looking upward."

And then feeling that his words were outside the child's comprehension, he drew her to his breast, and told her the story of Jesus; told her that sweet story in its simplest and most human phase—the Holy Child on His mother's knee; the baptism in the river; the Spirit of God descending from the parted skies in the form of a dove; the Man of Sorrows; the story of the cross and the grave.

The child listened, her eyes wide with wonder.

"Daddy did not know, or he would have loved Jesus," she said.

And then Lashmar taught her the first four lines of that childish prayer which he had learnt from his governess three-and-twenty years before: "Gentle Jesus, meek and mild, look upon a little child."

Stella repeated the words after him in her clear, sweet tones; the first prayer those lips had ever syllabled. Other prayers followed, the Lord's prayer first and chiefest—and Betsy's conscience was relieved of a burden.

Stella had lived nearly a month at the castle before she encountered Lady Lashmar. The dowager had gone up to London with Victorian and taken him to Eton, and had spent a week at Windsor in order to soften the agony of parting with her idol. She saw him in the playing fields, she saw him on the river, and his young beauty seemed to her the perfection of ripening manhood. She talked to him of his future—his career—emphasising the word with heroic meaning, trying to kindle the fire of ambition in that young mind.

"As a younger son you are bound to distinguish yourself, Victor," she said. "Your poor brother is Lord Lashmar, he can afford to dream away his days in a library, but you will have no distinction except that which you may win for yourself. You must be the architect of your own fortunes."

"I wouldn't much mind being the architect," said Victor; "but I don't want to be the builder—not to have to lay brick upon brick, and carry

the hod of mortar, don't you know—not to have to work my way upward inch by inch, as some poor beggars do, in the church, or in the law."

"You need have no profession but politics."

"That's deuced slow work, and deuced hard work, I'm told. One has to drudge over blue books, and cram statistics, and sit in the House on summer afternoons to ask questions, when life and fashion are at floodtide outside. If I could make a great speech now, upon some burning question, at midnight, and wake next morning to find myself famous!"

"Ah, that is the way with boys, they want to succeed without working for success!"

"Mother," said the boy, coming closer to her and lowering his voice, "do you know some of the fellows here have told me that I should be a fool to work, because I *must* be Lord Lashmar before I am many years older. Poor Lash has such shocking bad health, don't you know, and it isn't likely he'll last long."

"Whoever taught you to think that you will be Lord Lashmar is your worst enemy," said his mother severely; "Lashmar suffers a martyrdom from neuralgia, poor fellow, but there is nothing

organically wrong. Sir William Spenser told him that he may live to be an old man."

"I'm glad to hear it," said the boy, "for I'm very fond of old Lash. He has always been a good brother to me. As for working, well, I don't like work, who does? but I always try to be top of the tree everywhere, and I shall try to be top of the tree at St. Stephen's, by-and-by. I shall go in for aristocratic radicalism."

"Victorian!" cried her ladyship, growing pale with horror.

"There's no one succeeds better than your swell Rad. Look at Maupertius, for instance. Who, has got the ear of the House half so well as he has? A man born in the purple makes such a grand effect when he calmly expounds the theories of advanced socialism? I shall go in for the kind of gospel that poor beggar Boldwood preached so eloquently; only I shall be as mild as Maupertius, don't you know, and I shall be the wit of the House. Nothing tells like wit."

"But wit is one of the few things that cannot be learnt," said the mother, smiling fondly at her boy's arrogance. "A man cannot be either a tenor-singer or a wit for the wishing."

"We shall see," answered Victorian con-

fidently. "If I go into the House it will be to make the members laugh—with me, not at me, mother."

"I would have you full to the brim of ambition," said her ladyship, kissing the broad strong brow, "I do not mind your being self-confident—vain, even—so long as you are earnest and industrious."

This was their parting interview. Lady Lashmar had never so much as hinted at her own hope of her son's succession to his half-brother's honours; and now she breathed not one word of the bitter blow which Spenser's favourable opinion had been to her. She felt now that the hope had been wicked, unnatural: yet she told herself that she had always done her duty to her stepson, and that nothing could ever make her falter in her performance of that duty. If it had pleased Providence to relieve him of the burden of existence it would have seemed to her that Providence had acted wisely and beneficially alike for Lashmar and for Victorian. But Lady Pitland's second daughter had been too well brought up to be capable of rebellion against Providence. It was not in vain that she went to church twice on Sundays, and once on every Saint's Day, not

even slighting the minor saints by non-attendance. She was eminently orthodox in her ideas, and she bowed with dignified submission to the Inscrutable.

She went back to Middleshire, and was cordially received by her stepson, who was at the station to meet her, testifying to that respect which was her due. He was standing on the platform when the train stopped, and her ladyship thought she had never seen him looking so well.

"I shouldn't wonder if Sir William were right. He looks as if he might live to be ninety," she said to herself, and then, with a sigh, she murmured "Poor Victorian."

Orthodox as she was it could but seem to her a hardship that her son, in his strength and perfection of manhood, should be kept in the background by this blighted life.

"How brown you have grown, Lashmar," she said, as they shook hands, "and how well you are looking!"

"I have not had one of my headaches since you left. I suppose it is because I have lived more out of doors than I used to do."

"I should advise you always to live out of

doors," replied his stepmother, with a forced laugh.

She was grave and silent as they drove home; excused herself for being dull and stupid on the ground of fatigue. Not one question did she ask about Lashmar's *protégée*: yet the thought of Boldwood's child was in her mind as they drew near the castle. It was on account of this brat no doubt that Lashmar had been spending his life in the gardens, bronzing himself to the complexion of a plough-boy. It was this whim which had given new brightness to his aspect, a new impetus to his life. Lady Lashmar was far too orthodox to be angry with Providence; but she felt that she might be as angry as she liked with Boldwood's daughter.

She stood upon her balcony next morning, wrapped in her dressing-gown, tasting the sweet freshness of the air that swept over woodland and meadow, and rippled the wavelets of the river yonder. Far away in the rose-garden, a quaint old quadrangle of turf and rose-trees, hedged in with clipped yew, she saw two figures—Lashmar's and a little girl in a white frock. The child was flitting from flower to flower. The man was sauntering up and down the grass,

reading; but he looked round every now and then at the child, and occasionally stopped and bent down to talk to her.

Lady Lashmar stood for a long time watching them.

"Was there ever such an absurd infatuation?" she said to herself, contemptuously.

It was nearly a week later when she met the child for the first time in the corridor. Stella was alone, tripping along gaily, holding up a lap full of wild flowers—free, independent, happy. She had just come in from a morning spent on the river, in Lashmar's boat.

Her ladyship laid her hand upon the child's shoulder, and bent down to scrutinise the small sallow face.

Ugly? Well, no, not so ugly as she had thought that night. The small features were too delicately moulded for ugliness. The eyes were wonderful—too large, too dark for childish beauty; but in a woman they would have been eyes worthy of Cleopatra.

"I shouldn't wonder if the creature were to grow up into a handsome woman," thought her ladyship, "and then the chances are that Lashmar will marry her. With his eccentric ideas there

would be nothing extraordinary in such a marriage. Let me see, she is five—it will be twelve or thirteen years before she is marriageable. That is a comfort. And in the meantime she may hinder his marrying anyone else."

There was comfort also in this last idea, and yet Lady Lashmar could not bring herself to regard the child as anything but a viper.

"What is your name?" she asked sternly.

"Stella," answered the child, looking up at her ladyship calmly, unabashed by grandeur of presence or splendour of raiment, or by the frown which contracted the questioner's dark brows.

"Stella! a fine theatrical name, upon my word. I suppose it was Lashmar who called you Stella."

"It was my daddy. He called me Stella. Do you know where he is?" looking up eagerly, with sudden interest.

Her ladyship was on the point of replying. In another instant the hard, bitter truth would have been spoken, had not Lashmar come out of the library close by and interrupted the conversation.

"So you have been talking to Stella," he said

cheerily. "Don't you think she has improved in Betsy's care?"

"Betsy has dressed her a great deal too fine," said her ladyship, with a scornful glance at the cream-coloured frock and scarlet sash, the scarlet shoes, and the coral necklace on the little throat, which had the yellowish whiteness of ivory.

"Oh, I like her to look pretty! She brings stray gleams of beauty into the dullness of a student's life. There, you can run away, Stella. Run away and get your dinner, and come to me again at four o'clock for your reading lesson. Good-bye till four."

He stooped to kiss her, and dismissed her with a smile. She tripped away, murmuring "Four o'clock, four o'clock—go again at four o'clock," in a kind of tune, as if to impress the fact upon her mind.

Lady Lashmar felt the uselessness of argument with her stepson. That quietly determined temper of his had always baffled her in any dispute which involved earnest purpose on his side. In trifles he was always ready to give way to her. He allowed her to reign undisputed mistress of a house which by inheritance was all his own. He allowed her to spend as much of his money

as ever she cared to spend in the maintenance of a state which was far beyond his desires: but wherever feeling or affection was concerned he had his own way.

Her ladyship had wished to get rid of the old book-worm tutor when Lashmar came of age. The man had taught his pupil all he could teach. He was a shabby-looking Dominie Sampson-ish personage, whose dingy presence was a blot upon the elegance of Lashmar Castle. He was receiving two hundred a year for doing nothing. But when these views of hers were made known to Lashmar he informed her that he meant Gabriel Verner to end his days at the castle.

“Verner is too old to go among new faces or to learn new habits,” he said; “he will be very useful to me as a librarian and secretary. He can take care of my books and write my business letters.”

“He has no more idea of business than one of those peacocks,” said her ladyship, looking absently out upon the terrace where Juno’s birds were spreading their plumes in the sunshine.

“Fortunately *I* have. I can always tell him what to say.”

So Gabriel Verner stayed, a quaint old figure,

with shoulders so bent and rounded by stooping over books that he too seemed a hunchback. Lady Lashmar sometimes thought that he had cultivated a hump, by way of mute flattery. He was a harmless old man, small and pale, with a large overhanging brow, and silvery hair, which he wore long, like Milton, to whom he fancied that he bore a striking resemblance. He had an inoffensive kind of intellectual vanity, and was engaged upon an elaborate commentary on Aristotle's metaphysics, which he feared to publish lest he should become suddenly famous in the decline of his life, and sink into the grave crushed by the weight of his laurels, like Tarpeia under the bracelets of the besiegers. He contrived to live at the castle, without obtruding himself upon its proud mistress. He had his private sitting-room near the library, where he dwelt alone when he was not with Lashmar. Once in a way, when she was in a benevolent mood, Lady Lashmar invited him to lunch; or, if she had a learned visitor she would go so far as to ask Mr. Verner to dinner, in order that he might relieve her of her burden, and do all necessary listening and sympathising in her stead. Gradually she had become resigned to the idea

that he was to end his days at Lashmar. She even knitted warm comforters for him, which he used to wear, and speak of with reverence as "her ladyship's little attentions."

It was to Gabriel Verner that Lady Lashmar now turned for sympathy. She joined him on the terrace that afternoon while he was taking his constitutional walk, after his temperate luncheon, trotting up and down with a volume of German metaphysics under his arm, a book to which he applied himself for a few minutes ever and anon, reading a little bit, and then pacing up and down.

"My dear Mr. Verner, how well you are looking!" cried her ladyship, "ever so much better than when I left the castle."

"I think it must be because I have been more in the open air," replied the old man, unconsciously answering just as Lashmar had answered; "his lordship and I have been spending our days on the river during the late glorious weather; we have taken our books and our luncheon——"

"And his lordship's latest plaything—that horrid child," interrupted Lady Lashmar.

"I can assure your ladyship that the little girl

is a most amenable child, and a very interesting companion. I never saw so young an intellect of such scope and development; it induces me to think with Aristotle that as in the young of some of the lower mammals the——”

“Of course the child must be sharp, cunning, old-fashioned. She is the child of sedition and freethought. The child of a man whose intellectual powers were employed only in doing mischief. I am not surprised that you should think the child clever. A few years hence she will be a great deal too clever for any of us—a source of unspeakable mischief—unless you, dear Mr. Verner, can exercise your great influence over Lashmar; for you have great influence over him, my dear sir; he positively adores you, and thinks your book will revolutionise European thought.”

The phrase was large, but when Lady Lashmar had her own purpose to gain she always did things largely.

“You are too kind,” murmured the Aristotelian meekly.

“Yes, dear Mr. Verner,” she hurried on, “you must really bring your superior brain to bear upon poor Lashmar. He is clever, but a mere dreamer.

You must show him the danger involved in this folly of his—the incubus he is preparing for himself in the future. What in heaven's name is he to do with this child by-and-by if she should turn out badly? And of course she will turn out badly. I have a profound belief in hereditary instinct."

"And I, dear Lady Lashmar, have an equally profound belief in education. Not for worlds would I thwart Lashmar in this fancy of his. Remember, he saved that baby's life at the hazard of his own. She is his—a God-given boon. He has seemed ever so much happier since she has been here. She interests, she amuses him, she takes him out of himself; and think what a blessing that self-forgetfulness must needs be in such a case as his where nature, *injusta noverca*, has been so unkind."

Gabriel Verner stopped in some confusion. What if that phrase, *injusta noverca*, should seem personal. Happily Lady Lashmar had been educated at a period when young ladies were not taught Latin.

"Do not fear the result," continued Verner. "I will be responsible for the child's training; and I pledge myself that education shall conquer evil

instincts, if there is anything evil in that young character."

Lady Lashmar pushed the argument no further. There was evidently no help to be obtained here.

"I must go and put on my bonnet," she said rather shortly; "I have a round of tiresome calls to make. I will leave you to your beloved Plato."

The Aristotelian shuddered at that hated name. To think that after all these years of intercourse, after having had the nature of his studies and lucubrations so often expounded to her, Lady Lashmar did not yet know to which school he belonged!

For six years of young, fresh life, Stella Boldwood was almost entirely happy. She lived in a world where all things were new—to the dweller in the tents of the people—an actual world of beauty and luxury which knew not change; a world of thought whose horizon widened with every day of her existence. Education to Stella was as sunlight to the flowers, or spring time to the birds. Her eager mind opened to receive the treasures of knowledge; her vivid imagination shed its own brightness upon every subject; and she was taught as seldom children are taught in

this super-enlightened age of ours. She was taught as sweetly and as pleasantly as children are told the legends of fairyland on a mother's knee. Lashmar devised his own system of education. She was to learn nothing in which she was not interested, to repeat no dry formulæ, parrotwise. She was to be troubled with none of those abstruse technicalities which the modern grammarian has devised for the torture of childhood. The story of the earth on which she lived was not to be made odious to her by dry scraps of science, long rows of figures, altitudes of mountains, lengths of rivers. She was to learn the beauty and the glory of the universe unawares, out of picture books and tales of travel and adventure. Instead of knocking her poor little head against a row of unfriendly figures in order to learn the exact height of such and such peaks of the Andes, or the Himalayas, she was in fancy to roam those mountains, to tremble on the edge of stern precipices, to gather strange flowers that bloom in their remoteness, to make acquaintance with strange creatures that dwell in those inaccessible regions. She would sit for hours at Lashmar's feet listening to the experiences of some hardy explorer, and then with her babyish

pencil she would draw fancy-pictures of the wild, lonely hills, the gigantic lakes, and awful woods, the world which to her vivid imagination was as familiar as the meadows and orchards of Middle-shire.

Lashmar taught his pupil history in a series of narrations, beginning with the Bible-stories of that far-away patriarchal world in which good men dwelt under the personal protection of their God, holding constant converse with heaven; and working gradually downwards through the dark mystery of Egypt to the fair dawn of Greece. He lingered long and lovingly over that fairy land of Olympus. He was steeped to the lips in Greek legend, Hesiod and Homer, and all the Homeric hymns.

And Stella loved to hear these fair myths of a world that is dead, asked again and again for stories of Dionysus and Demeter, of Helen and Paris, of Hector and Achilles, of Ajax and Agamemnon; stories terrible and stories beautiful, stories at which her hair seemed to rise with horror, stories which brought back the happy smile to the young lips. In the boat beneath the willows on sultriest summer afternoons, or beside the winter fire, betwixt afternoon tea and the

eight o'clock dinner, Stella's education was always going on; an education of legend and history, poetry, and fact; an education of oral instruction which exacted no labour from the growing brain, an education which was always sowing the seed and never reaping the harvest. *That* was to come later.

Gabriel Verner took the child in hand for an hour every morning. He taught her to read and write and cipher. That was the only drudgery of her education. All the rest was learnt at Lashmar's knee.

Their life crept onward with a monotony which to anyone, except a student, would have been intolerable. Lady Lashmar came and went. She was in Grosvenor Square for the season. She spent all one summer at Homburg for her gout, taking Victorian with her. She took him for another vacation to the Engadine. She spent a month with him in Paris. But, except for an occasional week in the picture-seeing season, Lord Lashmar rarely went to London. He found contentment, occupation, variety in that matchless library which was the pride of Lashmar Castle; and he found recreation and amusement in the society of his adopted daughter.

And thus, in the lap of luxury, beloved and cherished, Jonathan Boldwood's daughter arrived at her eleventh birthday. She had remembered her birthday, young as she was, and had been able to tell her benefactor the exact date, because it was a day with a name. This dark child with the star-like eyes had begun life upon Midsummer-day.

Lashmar questioned her sometimes about her earliest experiences—very gently, lest he should evoke sad memories, revive her passionate grief for her father, perhaps. He asked her if her father had ever told her anything about her mother, or of his own life.

Yes. He had told her that he was once a gentleman, that he was born in a great house near the sea; far away on the Scottish border. He had told her that her mother was beautiful and ought to have been rich. This—told vaguely as a child would relate shreds and patches of half-remembered speech—was all that Lashmar could obtain by his questioning.

After all, the past history of Jonathan Boldwood could matter very little. There was evidently no one to claim the child; and that, in Lashmar's mind, was the main point.

Only one relic of the dead man had been saved from the fire. A small tin cash-box, with the initials J. B., had been found among the ashes and rubbish below that portion of the ruined pile in which Boldwood's rooms had been situated. It was identified as his by a fellow-lodger; and was ultimately handed over to Lashmar, together with the key which had been found hanging on his steel watch-chain. Watch, chain, and key, were given up to Lashmar after the inquest.

The contents of the casket were disappointing. It contained papers which the smoke had blackened so as to be utterly undecipherable. The original form was there, but reduced almost to tinder. The matter had vanished. The only uninjured object was a miniature in a double gold case, which had better resisted the action of the fire than the ill-made metal box. The miniature was an old-fashioned painting upon ivory; the portrait of a man in the prime of life. A grave dark face, with large dark eyes, and a high bald forehead. Lashmar judged by the peculiar form of beard and coat-collar that the original had been a foreigner; the type was un-English. He showed Stella the picture and asked her if she had ever seen it before.

“No, never. What was it, who was it?”

Lashmar sealed up the sheets of tindery paper in a large envelope, and subscribed it carefully, “Burned papers found in Boldwood’s cash-box,” with the place and date. He cleaned up the cash-box, and put the miniature and the papers back into it, locked it, and tied the key to the handle, then wrote a label, “This box is Stella Boldwood’s property, the only thing saved from her father’s lodgings.” He put the box in a locked book-case where he kept some of his most valuable books. A priceless Decameron, an old copy of Rabelais, and some of the least respectable among the classics from the printing press of mediæval Venice.

CHAPTER VI.

"OUT OF SIGHT, BEYOND LIGHT, AT WHAT GOAL
MAY WE MEET?"

It was Midsummer Day, and Stella was eleven years old, an ever-memorable anniversary in that young life; so sweet in its summer dawn, so fatal before sundown.

Lady Lashmar was in London, Victorian was at Oxford. He had hardly spent three months at the castle during those six years in which Stella had dwelt there, and he had exchanged scarcely a dozen words with her. He had exaggerated his mother's prejudices against the orphan, and avoided her as if she had been a toad.

Lashmar and his *protégée* had their little world all to themselves, save for their devoted slave, Gabriel Verner, who still hovered on the brink of publication, the manuscript of his great book still virgin, unsoiled by the finger-marks of the compositor, and who still forecast with terror the

day in which the world should ring with his name, and cabinet ministers insist upon making his acquaintance.

Stella's birthday had been always made in some wise a festival by her adopted father. He wanted the child to lack none of those childish pleasures which fathers and mothers give their children. She was in after years to recall no deprivation, no loss of privilege or pleasure. And this year he felt more than usually anxious to do honour to her birthday. The time was drawing near when this happy Arcadian existence, this easy-going education at her benefactor's feet must needs be changed for a more conventional form of life. The time was coming when Stella must be handed over to feminine care, in order that she might learn the ways and the accomplishments of women. It would have pleased Lashmar to have carried out his work to the end, to have seen his *protégée* grow up to ripening womanhood under his care, to have taught her all things that she was ever to learn, to have created in her a spiritual twin-sister, a second self, the sweet companion and consolation of his loveless days. But regard for her interests, the fear that he might create that modern monster, the philosopher in

petticoats, made him hesitate; while Gabriel Verner's suggestion, that in days to come scandal might cloud the relations of protector and protected, was not without weight with him. He made up his mind to seek out some tranquil and happy household, some perfect woman nobly planned, in whose fostering care Stella might develop into enlightened and graceful womanhood. And then—and then—in the days to come she might still be his companion and friend, again live under his roof and brighten his days, the first to bid him good-morning, the last to say good-night. She would marry, perhaps; yes, that would be best for both of them. She might anchor herself in marriage to some mild young cleric, who could be Lashmar's chaplain; so that husband and wife might live together under his roof. He saw himself in that far future smiling upon Stella's children, finding a new star in some baby girl who would sit at his feet and listen to him in wide-eyed wonder, just as Stella had done. Surely his age would not be loveless or lonely; this waif snatched out of the fire would be to him a well-spring of love.

His life had not been all brightness since Stella had dwelt within his walls. Those sensi-

tive nerves of his—sensitive to cold, to heat, to fatigue, to pleasure even—had been racked many and many a day. The old agony of pain, the old weariness of prostration had been his again and again; but in every new interval of suffering he had found a growing sweetness in Stella's sympathy. The child had a sense of pity and love far beyond her years, a power to comprehend suffering rarely found even in a woman. She would sit by her benefactor's couch for hours—silent, watchful. She knew every expression of the sufferer's tortured brow, and could mark those intervals of respite in which he liked to talk, and in which it was good for him to have his thoughts diverted into new channels. Her little feet moved lightly over the carpet, her little hands were as gentle as rose leaves falling upon grass. Before she was eight years old she acquired a deftness which made her ministrations pleasanter than those of the most experienced woman-servant in the castle. She could pour out a dose of medicine, or mix a tumbler of lemonade with unerring precision. She was Lashmar's chief nurse in all his illnesses, which, being for the most part of a nervous character, involved no degrading office for nurse or attendant. Gabriel Verner was Stella's

subordinate in the sick room, and was quite as gentle as a woman.

Lord Lashmar generally breakfasted in his study when her ladyship was away, and at such periods Verner and Stella always breakfasted with him. The breakfast hour was nine, and Lashmar often spent an hour in the garden before breakfast, sometimes alone, but more often with Stella for his companion.

She was with him this morning, proud in the repetition of her first Greek verb. She had been learning Latin for more than a year, and could recite bits of the *Bucolics* with perfect intonation and precision, but Greek had been begun within the last few weeks, and Stella was intensely interested in the beginning of a language which she had been taught to consider the grandest tongue that the peoples of this earth had ever spoken. Had not Homer recited his wondrous tale of Troy in those sonorous syllables? Stella knew the story of Troy as well as other children know the story of Red Riding-Hood.

Stella repeated her verb in its innumerable tenses with very few mistakes, and won a kindly word of approval from Lashmar.

"Most little girls at your age would be learn-

ing French instead of Greek," he said; "but, as there is nothing in the French language equal to Homer or Plato, I would rather you should learn Greek first and French afterwards."

They went into breakfast together. Mr. Verner was in the study waiting for them, with his notebook and pencil in his hand, going over a passage in his book. He wrote his manuscript in small scraps, which he revised and re-wrote again and again, carrying the little book about with him wherever he went, poring and pondering over every paragraph, every phrase; and by this laborious method he had contrived to attain an English style which read like a literal translation from Hegel or Schopenhauer.

The table was bright with flowers, old English silver, and old English china. A large dish of strawberries showed crimson against a background of tea-roses in a great Japanese bowl. The substantial were all upon a side-table. Lashmar was wont to breakfast lightly, on new laid eggs and strawberries and cream, in this summer weather, and Stella cared only for crisp, light rolls and fruit and cream. It was Mr. Verner whose fine appetite did justice to the good things on the side-table.

Stella gave a cry of surprise and rapture as she took her seat. Upon her folded napkin lay a glittering golden watch, with a slender chain coiled round it like a serpent. The back of the watch was enamelled, and on the enamel appeared the initial S., surmounted by a star in tiny brilliants.

"Oh, what a beautiful watch!" she cried; "whose is it?"

"Yours, Stella. You are so precise in giving me my medicine when I am ill that I am sure you know the value of time; so I thought you would like to have a time-keeper of your own."

Stella ran to him, and threw her arms round his neck and kissed him.

"How good you are to me! you are always giving me pretty things. But a watch! I never thought I should have a watch, like a grown-up person!"

"You are more thoughtful and more exact than many grown-up persons, Stella. You deserve to own a watch."

"I will be very, very careful of it," said the child earnestly.

She had often handled Lashmar's watch: had worn it for a week at a time when he was ill, so

she was not afraid to open this one. She read the inscription inside: "To Stella, from her adopted father, Lashmar, Midsummer Day, 1872.

"That is the best of all," she said; "I shall always love the watch for my adopted father's sake."

They were to start upon an excursion soon after breakfast—an excursion planned in honour of the day. Fifteen miles from Lashmar Castle there were the remains of a mediæval abbey—extensive ruins, in a very fine state of preservation, and situated in a beautiful country. Langdale Abbey was one of the places that everybody went to see, and it afforded an admirable excuse for a picnic. Lashmar knew every stone among the ruins, every wild flower and lichen that grew in the interstices of the stones and clothed the old walls with beauty. But he was never weary of Langdale Abbey, and he told himself that there could be no pleasanter way of spending the day than in a drive to Langdale.

He had lately bought a pair of horses, of which he was particularly proud, fine up-standing bays, an exact match in colour, size, form, action and pace—a pair of horses which would have attracted every eye in Hyde Park, but which

were hardly noticed in the neighbourhood of Lashmar Castle where it was an understood thing that Lord Lashmar always drove the finest cattle. He was so rich and had so few ways of spending his money that it seemed only right he should pay high prices for his horses.

He was an admirable whip, firm, temperate, with light hands and an unerring eye. He loved horses, and horses loved him. These bays were fine, honest animals, and reported to be as quiet as sheep. Lord Lashmar had driven them three or four times, and had found them irreproachable. He would never have risked Stella's safety by placing her behind dangerous animals, nor would he have imperilled the gray hairs of his faithful old tutor.

The picnic baskets were packed into the phaeton in the stable yard, and at eleven o'clock the carriage came round to the porch.

Stella was ready in the hall, beaming with happiness, the great dark eyes shining out of the shadow made by her broad-brimmed hat. Her short-waisted white frock, broad blue sash, and long wash-leather gloves made her look like one of Reynolds's children. Indeed, with her dark eyes and thick hair, cut straight across her brow,

she had always a look of Reynolds's portraits. The aristocratic old Rector of Lashmar used to pat her on the head condescendingly, and call her "My Reynolds girl." He was a good man, after his fashion, which was narrow. He could not see any merit in bringing up one orphan in the lap of luxury. He would have had the cost of Stella's maintenance given to some orphanage where it might have been distributed in the shape of thick bread-and-butter and hob-nailed boots, among many children. Lashmar's benevolence seemed to him as the costly box of ointment seemed to Judas—a lavish, unreasoning expenditure. He was always ready to echo Lady Lashmar's reprobation of her stepson's folly. Yes, no doubt he was preparing trouble for himself in the future. The girl must eventually become an incubus.

Stella took her seat beside Lord Lashmar in the phaeton, Gabriel Verner mounted behind, and the groom leapt lightly into his place when the horses were in full motion, deeming that his dignity would have been compromised by mounting a moment sooner. The bays went with a certain springiness, which told Lashmar they were very fresh.

"Were these horses exercised yesterday?" he asked of the groom.

"No, my Lord, not yesterday. Smiles knew your lordship wanted them for a journey."

"Were they out the day before?"

"No, my Lord. Smiles thought the weather was too bad."

The bays were going splendidly, with no hint of running away; but they were very eager, and wanted to go at the top of their pace. Lashmar kept them well in hand, and they bowled merrily along the high road outside the castle. They had fifteen miles before them.

"What nice horses," said Stella, enjoying the pace.

"Do you like them better than Pyramus and Thisbe?"

"Pyramus and Thisbe are darlings, but these go faster, don't they?"

"Yes, they are going faster to-day."

They had driven three or four miles in the morning sunshine, between hedgerows full of eglantine and honeysuckle, past a picturesque Middleshire village, with its tumble-down, half-timbered cottages in black and white, its untidy straw-yards and mouldering barns. The horses

were well in hand as Lashmar drove past the little cluster of humble dwellings, and the inn, with its blurred old sign and dripping horse-trough. The village seemed for the most part the abode of sleep or death; for all the men were in the fields, and all the children were at school. But here and there a woman looked out at her door, and admired Lord Lashmar's horses, the light phaeton, the groom's smart livery, and the pretty child in her white frock and straw hat.

About a hundred yards from the village the road made a sharp curve, and Lord Lashmar saw himself face to face with that which might mean danger.

A traction engine in full cry, snorting, panting, groaning—a traction engine serving as a tug for a huge waggon of hay, which loomed large above it, a waggon which should have been drawn by sleek and placid cart-horses, with plaited manes and decorative net-work flapping over their honest foreheads.

The groom stood up and uttered one of those inarticulate cries which are as a common language of the stable. The men in charge of the engine tried to abate the fury of their monster.

Too late! The horses were in that condition

of freshness which would have made them bolt at a feather—they *were off* in an instant—all their reserve force in full action.

"Sit firmly, for God's sake, Stella;" said Lashmar, and then to those behind, "Verner, keep your seat whatever happens; John, try to hold Miss Stella."

The groom wound his arm round the child's waist. She was looking at Lashmar's face, silent, awe-stricken. How pale he was, and how tightly his lips were set! Yet he did not look frightened, only grave, intent, anxious.

"Are we all going to be killed?" she asked tremulously.

"We are in God's hands, my darling," he answered.

There was no time for more. The danger was close upon them. Had there been a clear road the bolting of the horses would have been as nothing with such a whip as Lashmar.

But the road was narrow, and they had to pass that huge bulk of the hay-waggon and the engine. The drivers were dragging their load as far as they could towards the hedge, but there was little time for this, with those frightened horses tearing along at a mad gallop. Lashmar

was holding them firmly, keeping them fairly straight; but, just as they neared the engine, it gave one final snort; the off-horse swerved, the pole snapped, and both horses fell in a heap, dragging the phaeton over in their fall.

Black night closed over Stella's dreams, ending this birthday of hers in deepest darkness before it was noon.

* * * * *

After that sudden extinguishment of the actual world, there came one long dream of horror. One long dream—a dream without awakening, yet a vision so entangled that it was, as it were, many dreams within one dream. Not once in that long labyrinth of unreality did the child recognise the realities around her; not once did her senses emerge from that world of phantoms, and the burden of shadows that thronged about her bed—terrible shadows some of them, haunting shapes from the realm of legend and poetry—Agamemnon in his bloody bath, Achilles with the corpse of Hector tied to his chariot. There was one dream in which she was Hector, dead and bleeding, dragged to the Grecian ships—the grit and dust were in her throat and choked her, the thundering hoofs of those fiery horses deafened

her, she was dead yet sentient. All her studies, and stories, and happy fancies of the past, personified themselves in those everlasting hours of delirium—a period in which hours were exaggerated into ages, and a day seemed an eternity. Her first Greek verb, her lessons from Virgil, her scraps of science, her childish knowledge of the heavens—all the things she had learned became a torture to her.

She was a star in the constellation of Cassiopeia's Chair, shining with her sister-stars in the cold November sky. Oh! how remote, and how cold it was in that far world of night and darkness! how dreadful to be parted for ever from her friend and father! She could see the world she had left, a little spot in the immensity of the universe below her—one little spot, faintly luminous, like a glow-worm in a hedge; and there was one speck of brighter light in that dim world, an electric spark, no bigger than a pin's point, which she knew was Lashmar's soul. It shone like a star in that distant earth, brighter than all the other souls of humanity, because he was the kindest and noblest man upon the earth. "Like Christ," she said to herself. She had often told herself in her childish simplicity, unconsciously

irreverent, that he was like Christ. And now her agony was the thought of an impassable gulf between her benefactor and herself. She strained, she struggled to pass that black abyss; she stretched out her arms as if they were wings. Sometimes they seemed to her as wings, and carried her for a long way, whirling onward in darkness: but that glowworm spot in the far distance came no nearer to her straining eyes—that gulf was infinite and impassable!

“Never to see him again,” she moaned; “never to see him again. Too far—too far!”

And honest Betsy, who sat beside her bed sewing, wondered that the child, who had never recovered her senses since the accident, should have this instinctive consciousness of an irreparable loss.

At last there came an interval in that agony of delirium. The throng of spectres was clouded over by a gracious darkness. The weary arms ceased to strain towards that unattainable point. The burning lids fell over the aching eyeballs. A deep and healing sleep followed that feverish unrest; and the patient woke to know the kindly face of her nurse for the first time in ten long days and nights of fever.

She saw the sunshine of a summer afternoon streaming in at her window.

"Is it my birthday?" she asked, simply. "Why didn't we go to Langdale Abbey?"

And then, sitting up in her bed, very weak and white, and wan, she stretched out her tremulous hands, and asked—

"Where is my watch?"

"Here, darling," answered Betsy, taking the watch out of a morocco case on the dressing-table, delighted to gratify her patient. "There's your pretty watch. Oh, my, isn't it a pretty one! And ain't you lucky to have a watch, just like a grown-up young lady!"

The weak little hands wavered as they took the watch, the exhausted frame sank helpless on the bed, but the child held the watch before her eyes all the time, and the tremulous fingers contrived to open the case.

"Read it," she said faintly; and Betsy spelled out the inscription, "To Stella, from her adopted father, Lashmar." "Oh, isn't it beautiful!" exclaimed Betsy, and then she began to cry, and cried a deluge, as young women of her class usually can, seeming to have a better supplied reservoir of tears than the highly cultured,

"Don't cry," said Stella; "there's nothing to cry for."

She had forgotten the dream of the star, the pitiless abyss between her and Lashmar, the sense of everlasting severance.

She lay for some minutes looking at her watch, holding it in both hands, as if it were too heavy for one. Then she put it to her ear, and found that it was mute.

"A quarter to twelve," she said, "why did it stop at a quarter to twelve?"

Again Betsy dissolved into tears.

"Shoosh, dear," she murmured, patting Stella's shoulder, "go to sleep, my pet, till the doctor comes to see you. Let Betsy put the pretty watch under your pillow."

"I don't want to sleep any more; I want to get up and be dressed; you know it's my birthday, and I am to be all day with Lord Lashmar. How late the sunshine looks—like afternoon. Have I overslept myself?"

"You have been very, very ill, dear," answered Betsy, in a soothing, preachy-preachy tone, which is peculiarly exasperating to an intellectual child, "you are much too weak to get up. You shall

have your Brand's essence presently and a nice little bit of toast."

"But it's my birthday," urged Stella, "and I am to dine with his lordship."

"My poor pet, your birthday was ten days ago, a week before the funeral," answered Betsy.

The word was spoken unawares. That awe-inspiring, much-discussed event of the funeral—a stately and imposing ceremonial, including all the dismal grandeur of the old school and all the floral decorations of the new—had been in everybody's mouth at Lashmar Castle for the last six days. It was the standard by which time was reckoned.

"What funeral?" cried Stella, starting up in her bed with a scared look.

She was so weak that cold drops broke out upon her brow in the agitation of this question. Poor Betsy was at her wits' end.

"Go to sleep, pet," she pleaded; "the doctor wouldn't like you to talk so much. Lie down and go to sleep, lovey."

But even these endearments failed to soothe the perturbed spirit.

"What funeral?" repeated Stella; "is anybody dead?"

Betsy only patted her shoulder dumbly, with streaming eyes.

"Who is dead? Not Mr. Verner? Oh! he was so good to me. He is not dead, is he?"

"No, dear, no; Mr. Verner is quite well. He wasn't hurt at all, poor dear gentleman," answered Betsy.

"He wasn't hurt! Who was hurt, then? Was anybody hurt?" cried Stella, her eyes assuming the wild look they had had in delirium.

"You were hurt, my poor precious. You fell on your dear little head."

Stella gave a scream, and flung her arms round Betsy's neck. Memory returned in a flash.

"The horses!" she cried; "yes, I remember. Oh! those dreadful horses. Lord Lashmar drove so well; but I thought we were going to be killed. *He* was not hurt, was he? Ask him to come to me; I want to see Lord Lashmar; directly, directly."

Those large dark eyes of hers were growing wilder and wilder. They looked unnaturally large in the small, pale face, sorely shrunken from its childish plumpness during the wasting agony of that ten days' fever. She tried to get

out of bed, pushing aside Betsy's restraining arms.

"Ask Lord Lashmar to come to me. Let me go to Lord Lashmar."

"Lord Lashmar is out, love," said the frightened Betsy; "Lord Lashmar has gone to Brumm for the day, on particular business."

It was true. Betsy felt she had satisfied her charge, and saved her soul from the burden of a lie. It was literal truth which she had spoken, and yet for Stella it was not the truth: for Stella it was a miserable, mocking lie.

She was not satisfied, but lay back upon her pillows too exhausted to struggle. She lay moaning. "I want to see Lord Lashmar. When will he be back? Oh! when, when, when?"

She sobbed herself into a feverish, restless slumber; and she was delirious again that night.

The doctor was much concerned when he came to see her in the evening, and was told how she had recovered her senses for a little while, only to lose them again.

"Did you tell her anything?" he asked.

"Not a word," answered Betsy. "She wanted to see Lord Lashmar dreadfully, but I told her he was out for the day, and she seemed to be-

lieve me; but she made herself very unhappy about him. She was so fond of him, poor dear, and well she might be."

"Ah, well indeed!" said the doctor, shaking his head. "I'm afraid she has seen the best days of her life, poor little thing."

Mr. Stokes was a kind, simple soul, who had lived all his life in the village of Avondale, just a mile from the much smaller village of Lashmar, a pretty little cluster of houses on the bank of the river, nestling round an old Saxon church that seemed much too large for its surroundings. Mr. Stokes knew everybody in the neighbourhood, and had known the younger generation from their cradles. He was a skilful surgeon, and was tolerably shrewd in his diagnosis, though he seldom went farther afield than Brumm, and had not seen much of the great city since he was a student at Bartlemy's. He knew all about Stella, and Lady Lashmar's feelings with regard to her.

"I am afraid she is in for a relapse," he said after he had taken her temperature. "A hundred and five three-fourths. That looks bad. You must do all you can to keep her quiet. Give her Brand's essence and a teaspoonful of brandy with

a little yoke of egg alternate half-hours. You'll have to sit up with her again to-night."

"I don't mind *that*," said Betsy. "I don't mind anything except hearing her ask for Lord Lashmar."

The doctor was right. Stella re-entered the land of phantoms. This time her worst dream was of a vast and sunless swamp—such a swamp as that she had read about, far across the Atlantic—the Great Dismal Swamp, where never tree or flower flourished; a place of desolation; impassable, exhaling poisonous odours, brooded over by dark clouds, a semi-darkness worse than night.

And she was wading in that swamp for ever and for ever, weary to agony—the dull agony of aching bones and burdened brain. Far, far away a vanishing point in remotest distance, there was a speck of light—the same speck she had seen on the far earth when she was a star—and that light was Lashmar. She was perpetually trying to reach that distant point, weighed down for ever by the sense of utter impossibility, yet obliged to try. The agonising dream seemed to endure for ages; long nights of repetition, in which Betsy hovered over her charge with cup or

teaspoon, forcing her doses of nourishment between the parched hot lips, with a persistence that seemed sheer brutality; but that very tangible presence of the buxom Betsy had no effect upon the visionary world in which Stella dwelt. The dim and distant light was always there, glimmering faintly across the wide, gray waste, in the perpetual twilight.

Perhaps it was the faint gleam of the night-light in the remotest corner of the room, which suggested that distant ray shining across the dull gray level of dreamland.

It was in the night that the goblin crew rode rampant over that distracted brain. The days passed for the most part in a kind of stupor: the patient lying helpless, apathetic, recognising no one, caring for nothing, in a state of semi-consciousness which was neither sleeping nor waking.

From such a condition as this she was aroused by the howling of a summer storm in the great oaks, and the sharp rattle of the rain against the casement. The sky was cold and gray. Stella knew not if it were morning or afternoon. Memory was a blank again. She had forgotten all that had happened since her birthday, had for-

gotten the accident which had made that day fatal.

This time Betsy was not at hand to be questioned. It was between four and five o'clock, and Betsy had gone down to tea, had gone to expatiate upon the storm to her fellow-servants, who were all wont at such times to wish that they lived in London, where thunder and lightning would seem comparatively harmless amidst the cheerfulness and sense of protection afforded by crowded streets and policemen. The thunder and lightning were over, or Betsy would not have left her charge.

Stella looked about the room wonderingly slowly coming back from dreamland, slowly realising the facts of the external world. Yes, it was her own room; there were all those ornaments and knick-knacks which children speak of comprehensively as "pretty things." The silver casket on her dressing-table, the scent bottles, the china monsters, the bright coloured pilgrim bottles from that legendary Eastern world, of which she had heard and learnt so much—the cradle of mankind—the well-filled bookshelves, the dolls and doll's-house. But these last had been degraded from their high estate to an ob-

scure corner, things to be ashamed of, that one could ever have been so babyish as to care much about them.

Yes, it was her own room, that lightsome, airy chamber, high up among the tree-tops and the swallows. It was her nest, in which she had been as free and happy as the birds of the air, more tenderly cherished than ever nestling by parent bird.

The door leading into the sitting-room was half open, and there were people talking, she had heard their voices amidst the rattle of the rain and the bluster of the storm.

"Shall you send her away?" asked a manly voice, rich and full, a voice that was not altogether unfamiliar. It was like her benefactor's, but stronger, fuller.

"No, I shall keep her here. I consider that a sacred duty, for poor Hubert's sake. But I shall try to repair his sad mistake in the manner of rearing her. I shall bring her up as a child of the lower classes ought to be brought up. I shall train her to be useful, a bread-winner among a class of bread-winners."

Too well did Stella know this second voice. These were the sonorous tones of that terrible

personage whom she had met from time to time in the corridors or in the gardens, and who had always scowled at her, and passed her by in haughty silence. She knew the face and figure to which the voice belonged, the tall and stately form, the strongly marked brows and aquiline nose.

"Rather rough upon her, poor little wretch, after having been so pampered."

"That is poor Hubert's fault, not mine," replied her ladyship coldly.

"Well, it was one of those silly things which your very clever men are apt to do," said the other voice. "I took an intense dislike to the brat from the hour poor Lash brought her home, like some strayed mongrel, and not half so interesting. If I were you I should clear her out of the castle as soon as she is well enough to budge; pack her off to one of those innumerable institutions for rearing up beggar brats in the fear of their spiritual pastors and masters upon sound Conservative principles. You'll get rid of a nuisance; and there'll be a better chance of her making a good housemaid than if she is allowed to stay here where she'll always remember Lashmar's idiotic indulgence."

"I have told you that I mean to bring her up under my own eye," replied her ladyship, in a terrible voice.

She was a woman who could not brook contradiction, would not endure to have her will gainsaid or her wisdom questioned; least of all could she endure such questioning from her own son. She was a woman who loved to govern, and to whom the idea of domineering even over such a helpless waif as Boldwood's daughter was very pleasant.

"I shall bring her up under my own eye, she repeated; "I shall see that she is taught properly, and that above all she learns to forget her foolish childhood, and to understand her position as a friendless orphan, who must learn to earn her daily bread."

"A friendless orphan!" repeated Stella, in a faint whisper. Of whom were they talking? she asked herself. Could it be of her? She remembered how once when old Mr. Verner was expatiating upon Lashmar's goodness he had told her that were it not for that generous benefactor she would have been a friendless orphan.

And now her ladyship was talking about a

friendless orphan who had been brought up foolishly.

"She will have to begin a new life as soon as she gets well."

"As soon as she gets well," repeated Stella. Yes, it was of her they were talking. They had got her into their power somehow, those two enemies. They were going to alter her happy life. They would take away her Greek grammar perhaps, stop that new study of which she was so proud, and which had seemed to bring her nearer to Lashmar. He had talked to her of the time when they would be able to read Homer together.

Oh! where was Lashmar? Why did he not come and stop their cruel talking? She clasped her hands in an agony of despair. She called out in a faint scream, too weak to cry aloud, as it were struggling in a nightmare dream—

"Lord Lashmar, Lord Lashmar!"

A face—a bright young face, handsome as Apollo's—looked in at the door, only for a flash. It gave way in the next instant to the stern countenance of the dowager.

"Are you awake, child?" she asked.

"Please ask Lord Lashmar to come to me," cried the girl piteously.

"What do you want with Lord Lashmar? Lie down, child; you are too weak to sit up yet awhile. I'll send Betsy to you."

"No, no, I don't want her. I want Lord Lashmar. I shall go mad if I don't see him!"

The dowager seated herself in Betsy's vacant chair by the bed, an awful figure, stern and terrible as Fate itself.

She was clad from top to toe in black, densest black, not that rich and glittering raiment in which Stella had often seen her of old—a costly combination of satin and brocade sparkling and flashing with tremulous fringes of jet. This was a gown of some dull fabric which reflected not a ray of light. To her very chin Lady Lashmar was swathed in black crape, and black crape is to a child's eye of all fabrics the most hideous.

"You cannot see your benefactor, Lord Lashmar," said the stern voice. "You will never see him again. Cannot you understand what this black gown of mine means?"

"He is dead!" shrieked the child, and then remembering that ominous word dropped unawares by Betsy, "It was *his* funeral."

"Yes, my unhappy child, your benefactor was killed in the accident from which you narrowly escaped with your life. The loss for you is a bitter one in the present, although it may be a blessing to you in the future. My stepson's foolish indulgence might have been your ruin, here and hereafter."

Stella heard not a word of this little sermon. She had cast herself on her pillow, and was sobbing out her heart in the passionate, hopeless grief of childhood.

Dead! She had never thought that he could die. Dead! How often he had talked to her of what would happen when he was an old man; how she was to be the companion of his declining years, the compensation for all his losses.

Dead! Never more to look upon her with those thoughtful eyes; never more to speak to her in that low, tender voice; never more to touch her with that hand whose gentle touch upon her head had always seemed a benediction.

"My angel, my friend, my father!" she cried. "Oh, God! be good to me, and let me die too."

That was her prayer at morning and nightfall, for many a day to come.

CHAPTER VII.

THE NEW CINDERELLA.

JULY, with its roses and lilies, blossoming limes, and long sultry days, and lingering sunsets late into the dewy night, was over. It was August, and though summer was still lovely in the land, the summer evenings were shortening, the roses were waning a little, as to the limitless profusion of bloom; while here and there those flowers which are the harbingers of autumn began to show in the castle gardens: gaudy dahlias, old-world hollyhocks, flaming sunflowers, staring at the blue sky with their great round brown faces in ragged yellow nightcaps, against a background of gray stone wall.

Stella's new life had begun. It was verily a new life; so entirely different from the old one that it seemed to the child as if she had died and been born again, in the same place, but with another personality.

And yet though she still had her abode in

Lashmar Castle it could hardly be said that it was the same place as that which had been her home in the lifetime of Hubert, Lord Lashmar. She lived in other rooms; she looked out of other windows, at an utterly dissimilar prospect. She had not entered the library, or those adjoining rooms in which she had once been so happy since her benefactor's death. The gardens about which she had once roamed as freely as the butterflies were now a closed world for her. She had no more right to be there than the coachman's children, or the housekeeper's little niece: and not one of those well-behaved little persons would have presumed to enter her ladyship's garden.

Stella lived in the servants' quarters now, and looked out of windows which all opened upon the stable-yard, a great stony desert, whose only picturesque feature was the pump, with its stone basin, round which a coachman, with the love of the beautiful, had planted some nasturtiums. Those nasturtiums were almost the only flowers that Stella saw in that month of August. She was learning to know her place—her place as allotted and appointed by Lady Lashmar, and that place was the place of an under-housemaid,

There were eleven housemaids at Lashmar Castle. That had been the orthodox number as long as the oldest inhabitant of Lashmar village could remember. It was supposed that by no less a staff could the castle be scrubbed and swept and dusted as it should be. There were three upper-housemaids, each of whom had supreme command upon her particular floor. She was, as it were, captain of that deck. Then came the five second housemaids; two for the ground-floor, with its spacious state apartments and numerous sitting-rooms; two for the first floor, and which included her ladyship's suite and the new lord's suite, and all the important visitors' rooms; and one for the upper story, which was given over to rarely used bachelors' rooms and rat-warrens. Lastly, there were three drudges who fetched and carried water and coals, made the fires and cleaned the grates, slaves who were treated as the Israelites in Egypt before the advent of Moses.

Betsy had been reduced to the ranks of the eleven. She was one of the second housemaids, and her province was the first floor, where she was under the special supervision of her aunt Barker, who had a room of her own in an obscure

corner behind her ladyship's suite, one of those curious little rooms such as in Hampton Court Palace are described as the King's Closet, or the Queen's Oratory. Under Betsy's eye Stella was to be trained to all the duties of an upper-housemaid. She was not to go through the baser drudgeries, the water-drawing and coal-carrying, the black-lead brush and scouring paper. She was to be spared that rude apprenticeship, out of deference to the dead lord's fancy. Nay, should she prove especially teachable, and handy with her needle, she might eventually escape housework altogether and be admitted to the holy of holies, personal attendance upon her ladyship.

"You are getting short of breath and un-wieldy, Barker," said Lady Lashmar; "by the time that child is seventeen or eighteen I shall want somebody to run about for me." Barker shook her head, and pursed up her lips.

"I don't think Miss Stella will ever suit you in that way, my lady," she began.

"How often have I told you that she is not to be called Miss Stella?"

"I don't think Stella will ever do for a servant, my lady. His poor lordship spoilt her too much.

She knows such a lot, and she frets day and night about her Greek and Latin, over history and geography, and poetry, and such like. She starts up in the middle of the night sometimes sobbing as if her heart would break, and saying that she is forgetting everything his lordship taught her. And then she'll go over a lot of gibberish which she says is Greek or Latin, though I'm sure it don't sound like anything half so sensible. I don't believe she'll ever make a good servant, my lady; her life has been begun the wrong way."

"She is young enough to begin life again," replied her ladyship sternly. "The greatest blunder of the present day is the over-education of the masses: a blunder which is producing a race of young women who all want to be doctors and lawyers instead of wives and mothers; and a race of young men who would sooner starve in a paradise of pen and ink than be prosperous butchers and bakers, I look to you, Barker, to get all foolish nonsense out of that girl's head. If I hear any more of her fretting I shall send her to the workhouse."

After this Barker could say no more. She knew the iron temper of that mistress whom she

had served in all faithfulness and submission for the last fifteen years.

Stella suffered her new life meekly enough, but almost every hour of it was suffering. Reared as she had been, amongst delicatest, most gracious surroundings, by a man whose original refinement had been spiritualised by illness and seclusion, every detail of this outer world of the servants' hall and still-room jarred upon her sensitive nerves. The loud voices, the everlasting clatter, the quarrelling and jeering—jeering which was meant for wit—all these revolted the keen young spirit. Had she been a woman she might have put on the armour of philosophy. She might have retired within herself, lived her own life of quietness and contemplation amidst the bluster of these vulgar lives; but she was a child, and had not learned stoicism; she was a child, and dependent upon externals for her joy or sorrow, and all things in her external life had been made bitterness to her, at that time when her heart wounds were still fresh. Under the happiest circumstances she would have been broken-hearted by the loss of her friend and father; but as it was, all the conditions of her life intensified her sense of loss,

She had been banished from those pretty rooms in which she had lived for five joyous years. All her cherished treasures, her benefactor's gifts of toys and trinkets and ornaments had been taken away from her; and, worst loss of all, her books had been taken also. Those books which had been as gates opening into other worlds, the books which Lashmar had taught her to love and to understand.

The banishment from that Eden of her childhood had been effected by the dowager in the briefest, most off-hand manner. So soon as Stella was well enough to leave her room, Lady Lashmar sent her to the still-room. She was to live there with the upper-housemaids, and she was to sleep in the second housemaids' dormitory. Having pronounced this sentence, her ladyship locked the outer door and put the key of the tower rooms into her pocket.

"I shall arrange by-and-by what use we can make of those two rooms," she said; "no doubt they will be wanted when his lordship fills the house for the shooting."

Hubert Lashmar had been no sportsman: and there had not been a battue in the Lashmar preserves since his father's time. Victorian had gone

out with a couple of spaniels and a keeper when he happened to be at home in October: but for the most part the pheasants had had no enemies except the poachers. The servants were beginning to perk themselves already at the idea of big shooting parties and liberal vails.

So Stella was banished from her tower among the tree-tops, her casements overlooking dale and river, wood and hill-side. She was much too unhappy to think about her possessions, her "pretty things" as she had called them, so she made no moan at this off-hand confiscation of her property. It was afterwards, when she found herself sitting in a corner of the still-room, leaning her head against the wall, hearing the chatter of the maids as it were afar off, it was then that she thought of her books, and asked Betsy to fetch them for her.

Good-natured Betsy was almost as down-hearted as her charge at the sad change that had come over both their lives; for Betsy, as Miss Stella's personal attendant, had been somebody in the household, and had done very much as she liked. As a second housemaid she was nobody, and subject to be ordered about by her superior officer. She ran off to the tower, found it

locked, and then went to her aunt Barker, as the only safe means of communication with her ladyship.

"Might Miss Stella have her books out of the tower room?" asked Barker an hour later, when she was taking out her ladyship's dinner gown, while Celestine dressed her ladyship's hair.

"Certainly not," replied the dowager decisively. "Reading for a young person in her position is only another name for idleness. If she read her Bible and her hymn book that will be quite as much reading as she will have leisure for. Middleham tells me that she has hardly an idea of plain needlework."

Middleham was the chief of the housemaids, the oldest servant at Lashmar, older even in service than the housekeeper or the *chef*, both of whom had grown old-fashioned in the same employment. Middleham was seven-and-forty, and had lived at the castle since she was twelve. She was an awful personage, with a bony figure and gray hair. She could read a little, by spelling out the difficult words; but she had forgotten how to write, and she was proud of it. "I left school when I was ten," she said, "nowadays the girls go to school up to fourteen, and come away stuck-

up minxes that look down upon their parents, and are no more use in their homes than fine ladies. First Standard indeed! The only standard in *my* day was a broom and a scrubbing-brush. When a girl had learnt to be handy with those she was a help to her parents."

Middleham was a superior needle-woman. Those great bony hands of hers could do fine stitching that looked as if done by fairy fingers. She had sole charge of the rich stores of house linen, finest that the looms of Belfast could produce; table linen into every piece of which the armorial bearings of the Lashmars were woven. Under the cold gray eye of Middleham, Stella made her first essays in plain needlework.

"I declare the child hardly knows how to hold her needle," said the head housemaid.

"Lord Lashmar did not like to see me work," faltered Stella tearfully.

Middleham groaned aloud.

"You'll have to work now, and if you don't learn to work well, you'll have to be sent to the workhouse," said Middleham, and then looked round triumphantly as one who had made a pun. The other housemaids all laughed dutifully. They feared and hated Middleham, who was a fierce

foe to followers, and all "walking out." It was popularly supposed that she had never walked out with anyone herself, that her innate grimness had kept followers at a distance. That, like Shakespeare's Royal Virgin, she had ever walked in maiden meditation, fancy free: and it may be observed, that at the time that lovely line was penned, good Queen Bess must have been about as grim a personage as Middleham.

Oh, how dull the life was! how dreary and monotonous, despite its clatter! The great dinner in the servants' hall, the steaming joints, the monster pudding, the all-pervading smell of beer; the male underlings all clustered at the end of the table, having their own conversation, and their own whispered jokelets, digging each other in the ribs, exploding, with full mouths, into foolish, spluttering laughter. Then the long afternoon; sitting at work hemming a kitchen cloth, perhaps, by the window, that looked into the stony yard, where all the summer air was scented with stables. How the child pictured the park and the river, the loved and lovely river on which she and Lashmar had been wont to spend long summer days, with books and sketching block—dreamy days, idle days, sweet, sweet days! She could see the

shining wherry with its luxurious crimson cushions, its sheepskin mat, its boxes and artful contrivances for picnic; luncheon or afternoon tea. She wondered whether the new Lord Lashmar was enjoying himself in that boat on this exquisite afternoon. She looked up at the summer sky, the only thing of beauty which she could see from her dungeon, a sky of deepest sapphire, with fleecy cloudlets dancing gaily in the blue.

"I do declare you have not done six stitches in as many minutes," said Middleham. "I have been watching you."

The pale, pinched face reddened, and the needle went a little quicker over the harsh fabric. Middleham resumed her study of a bad place in one of the best table cloths. These two had the spacious still-room all to themselves this afternoon. It was cleaning day on all the floors of the castle, a universal scrubbing and polishing, which kept the ten housemaids at work till tea-time. It was only Middleham who could afford to sit still after having given her orders. She would walk round the ground-floor rooms by-and-by, just before tea, and spy out grains of dust overlooked in obscure corners, or pieces of furniture that had not been properly polished.

At five o'clock a bell sounded, and the first and second housemaids came swarming in to tea. The upper servants had their meals in the housekeeper's room; the drudges, under-housemaids, scullery and kitchen and vegetable maids, herded in a den of their own, a cool, stony room, off one of the kitchens. Barker was free of housekeeper's room and still-room; and she had the extra privilege of having her tea carried up to her own little nest, whenever she was so minded.

How Stella hated that noisy tea-hour, the foolish jokes and laughter, the cruel chaff for which she sometimes afforded the object, the great metal pots which gave the tea a tinny flavour, the mountains of thick bread-and-butter, the fishy smell of periwinkles or shrimps, the litter of cresses and other green-meat, without which tea was unpalatable to the housemaids.

It was the hour at which they all unbent, with elbows on the table, and tea poured into saucers—the hour at which they talked and laughed the loudest. They had all forgotten their dead lord, and were full of anticipations about the high jinks that would be held at the Castle now Victorian was master.

“I don't suppose there'll be much of a change

yet awhile," said Barker, who happened to be taking her tea in the still-room. "His lordship is going away in a fortnight. He has been appointed First Secretary of Legation at Ve-enna."

"You might have told us that before," retorted Middleham, who was jealous of Barker's superior opportunities.

"I only heard it this morning when I was waiting on her ladyship. His lordship came into her room with an open letter in his hand, and showed it to her. 'I must be off in a fortnight,' says he. I could see that she was very vexed. 'That was all very well when you were a younger son,' she says, 'but I don't see the necessity for it now.' 'Do you suppose I want to see the world any the less because I am called Lord Lashmar?' says he. 'What a queer old mother you are!'

"What a queer old mother!" echoed a chorus of housemaids, with Homeric laughter. "Fancy calling her ladyship a queer old mother. He's a rare one for cheek, is Master Victorian. He's your right sort for a lord; he'll stamp 'em down wherever he goes."

"'Vienner 'as been the dream of my life,' he says, and then goes whistling out of the room,

as light-hearted as you like, leaving her ladyship blacker than thunder."

Stella sat amidst their babble, with no relish for steaming tea in a thick crockery cup, and with a loathing of shrimps and periwinkles. Afternoon tea with Lord Lashmar had been a poem. The quaint old silver teapot—silver beaten so thin and enriched with such delicate *repoussé* work—the semi-transparent cups, the dainty cream-jug and toy sugar-tongs, the wafer biscuits and bread-and-butter, the cool sweet atmosphere of an exquisitely ordered room, the flowers, the pictures, the books, the all-surrounding beauty: and she had exchanged these things, and the dear love that made them sweetest, for the company of these vulgar women who despised and laughed at her.

Betsy was kind, and the others did not mean to be unkind. They did not beat or pinch or starve her; but they were powerless to comprehend the workings of that young soul. They saw the red swollen eyelids, and called her a cry-baby; they pointed the finger of derision at her because she was unskilled and clumsy in duties that were so easy to them; because she could not hem a duster expeditiously, or polish

a mahogany table. And again and again came the reproach against the dead. "What a pity Lord Lashmar had brought her up to be such a little fool!"

They had not spared her feelings in their talk of the dead lord. They had freely discussed the details of the accident—how his lordship had been thrown head foremost on the hard high-road, and had broken his neck. It was instantaneous death, they said. And how Stella had fallen more luckily upon the grassy border of the road, and had been brought home unconscious with concussion of the brain, and then before she awoke from her stupor, fever had set in—symptomatic fever, the doctor called it—and she had been very bad indeed.

But old Mr. Verner and the groom had escaped easily; the groom with a few bruises and a good shaking, and Mr. Verner, who fell on the top of him, without a scratch. Stella asked what had become of Mr. Verner, longing for him, as for the only friend left her; but she was told that he had left directly after the funeral, to go home to his own people, as it was supposed. There was not even so much comfort as this left to her.

Night was worst of all. She slept in a little bed in the spacious dormitory given up to the five second housemaids. It was a large, bare room, forming part of a special servants' wing which had been added to the castle fifty years before, and which the builder had made as un-beautiful as in him lay; and builders have large capabilities in that line. It was a long, white-washed room, like the common room of a debtor's prison. The windows looked into a stony well, on the other side of which was the laundry. There was not a tree nor a leaf within sight; even ivy had refused to grow in that vault-like atmosphere. And to keep up the prison-like idea the windows were all guarded with iron bars, lest peradventure the followers of the housemaids should break in and elope with their ladies, like the knights in border ballads.

Stella was sent to bed nightly at eight o'clock, sent to bed in the sweet summer gloaming, while the birds were singing so happily in the woods, and the flowers were only just beginning to close. Middleham was inexorable as to this hour of departure.

"At eight o'clock you go, or I'll know the reason why," and at eight o'clock Stella crept

wearily up the shadowy staircase, and took off her tear-stained black frock, and said her prayers—long, tearful prayers—and laid herself down upon the hard little bed.

Not to sleep. She was too unhappy to sleep easily, and she knew that at half-past ten the five would come, like a band of noisy fiends let loose from Pandemonium, and would talk of their Sunday clothes and their young men, and chaff each other, and perhaps quarrel with each other for a good hour, before slumber fell upon the fold. She would lie with closed eyes, trying not to hear, yet with those delicate ears of hers listening involuntarily. They were good-natured, honest girls for the most part; modest withal, according to their lights; no more frivolous or empty-headed than a band of school-girls in a fashionable seminary; but their talk, with its monotonous repetitions, its silly jokes, was torture to the sensitive child.

The hourly suffering of her days, sleepless nights, and loss of appetite soon had their effects, Stella began to look very ill—worse than she had looked even when she first got up from her bed of fever. Betsy was anxious about her; took her

aside and questioned her. Why did she look so miserable?

Stella burst into tears, and unburdened her soul. She was altogether unhappy. She hated the still-room, she hated Middleham; but most of all she hated the room where she slept, and the chatter of the maids.

"I hardly ever sleep," she added piteously; "I lie awake all night waiting to see the daylight between the iron bars."

"That's very bad," said Betsy, "we must see what can be done."

She went off to her aunt, and the two women put their heads together. There was very little use in appealing to her ladyship. Barker knew the state of her feelings towards her stepson's *protégée*.

There was a little room on the floor over the servants' dormitories, a floor in the roof, which was mostly given over to linen closets and box-rooms, a room that had been occupied once by a valet. It was very small, and had a sloping ceiling; but the dormer window commanded a side-long peep of the park—just about as much as that fine view of the sea put forward by a hardened lodging-house keeper—and Betsy, who knew her

charge better than anyone else, fancied that this little room would be as a haven of rest to Stella. James, the footman, who was a handy youth, might put up a shelf or two for her, and by-and-by perhaps Betsy would be able to get a few of those books—lesson books, poetry books, story books—for which the child's sickened heart longed so sorely; the only possible consolation where all human comfort was lost.

There were a neat little iron bedstead and the necessary furniture, all of the plainest, barest, most uninteresting order, as duly made and provided for a subject race; but when Betsy took the child up to the little room under the tiles, and told her that she could have it for her very own, Stella burst into hysterical tears of delight.

"Oh, how good of you!" she cried; "how sweet of you, Betsy! Somebody loves me still then."

"Of course I love you, you foolish little thing; whoever said I didn't? only I daren't disobey her ladyship; but some day, perhaps, I shall be able to get hold of a few of those books of yours that you've been fretting about."

"Will you, dearest Betsy? What, my Latin grammar, and the Greek one too; and my Virgil,

and the Greek Fairy Tales, and the Lady of the Lake? That was his last Christmas present—such a lovely book. They are all my very own, Betsy. He gave them to me. Her ladyship is a thief if she takes them away.”

“No, no, Stella, you must not talk like that. A little adopted thing like you, a poor little waif and stray, can have no real right to anything in a great house like this. Only if poor Lord Lashmar gave them to you it is natural that you should fancy they are your own, and I’ll see what I can do,” concluded Betsy vaguely.

She brought Stella half-a-dozen books that night in her apron. The key of the tower rooms had been given up to Middleham, in order that those rooms might be duly swept and dusted; and Betsy had got the key from that austere personage by sheer artifice, and had made her raid upon the books—Virgil, and two grammars, the Greek Fairy Tales, and Chapman’s Iliad, and a volume of Wordsworth. The Lady of the Lake was a richly illustrated quarto with splendid binding. Betsy could not venture to remove so handsome and ostensible a book, lest my lady should come on a visit of inspection, and that keen eye of hers should note the disappearance of the volume.

The others were all shabby little books which had seen hard usage.

Stella cried over these recovered treasures, in her tiny room with her dormer casement looking toward the tree-tops and the stars. Her mind was refreshed and soothed by the peaceful solitude of her poor little room. Here there was no coarse laughter, there were no cruel taunts. She could hear the owls hooting in the park, the dogs baying in the stable-yard. That was all. She seemed to be far away from everybody; and as she was altogether fearless she loved her solitude.

And now this child of eleven years old set herself with heroic patience to carry on unaided and alone the education which had been so cruelly interrupted by that stern foe to progress, Death. With her books and pen and ink, and two or three poor little ends of candle garnered for her day by day, by the faithful Betsy, Stella sat late into the night working at Greek and Latin; happy even when her studies were dryest, at the thought that she was carrying on the work her benefactor had begun.

"When I see him in heaven I shall be able to tell him what I have done," she said to herself.

Her theology was of the simple, confiding

kind which has grown old-fashioned even for little children. That fair future world was very real to her ardent fancy. She could picture the woodland walks of a paradise where it was always summer, and where she would meet Hubert Lashmar with a strange light upon his face, like the golden glory round the Infant-Saviour's head in the famous Lashmar Raffaele—that marvellous picture which she had so often gazed upon by her benefactor's side.

Those nightly studies, the reposeful solitude of her remote little garret had a calming influence upon her spirits. She was less unhappy now in the day-time, having her books to look forward to at night, knowing that she was not lapsing into ignorance, not becoming like those young women with whom she was obliged to live. She had her day-dreams now as she sat in the still-room window, inhaling odours of stables, and hemming an everlasting procession of tea-cloths. She had her dream of the day when she would be grown-up, and well educated, and would be able to write books, like old Gabriel Verner, and when she might earn enough money to have a tiny cottage of her own upon the banks of the Avon, and to have honest Betsy to live with her.

That was her chief day-dream. She had fancies of stories that she might write—stories of beautiful fatal creatures like Helen, or devoted wives like Andromache, or wicked, treacherous women like Clytemnestra. That busy brain of hers had already begun to weave the multi-coloured web of fiction, albeit her pen had not yet essayed to give those dreamings a tangible shape.

Lashmar had told her of an author—a woman—who had reaped thousands and a lasting renown by a simple story of village life, by reason of her power to dive deep down into the mystery of human nature, to fathom the strange depths of the heart of man, just as Homer did in those dim days when poetry began. She, Stella, sighed not for thousands, only for that lowly little cottage by the river, and a garden and summer-house, and plenty of books, and candles to light the long evenings, and kind Betsy for her companion, they two alone together and happy.

Lord Lashmar, the new Lord, Victorian, had left for Vienna without ever having looked on the little serf who had once been his brother's darling. He was very sorry to have lost "poor dear Lash," as he called him: but he felt not the slightest

interest in Lash's latest fad. Lash had always been full of fads, poor dear boy. Of course, her ladyship would do all that was best and wisest for the child.

"You'll make a sort of semi-genteel waiting-maid of her, I suppose," he said lightly; "have her taught to clean your laces and make your caps—whenever the day comes that you take to caps."

"Perhaps that will not be till I am a grandmother, Victor," she answered, smiling fondly at her beloved; "when you have a wife and children I shall feel myself verily a dowager, and then I suppose I must take to caps. By-the-by, dear, I saw Clarice last week. They have come back to the Hall."

"Indeed! Puffed up by her new dignity as a presented young person, I suppose," answered Lashmar.

"No, she was just as sweet as ever, quite simple and childlike. I am told she was one of the prettiest *débutantes* of the year. The newspapers all said as much."

"The newspapers are always ready to puff a girl whose father counts his fortune by hundreds of thousands," sneered Lashmar. "I don't think

the Brumm people have quite made up their mind whether Job Danebrook is worth one million or half a dozen; but they are all agreed that his father wheeled a barrow. Now I think both you and I retain an old-fashioned prejudice in favour of good blood."

"There is some very good blood in Clarice Danebrook's veins, Victor. You forget that her mother was a Montmorency."

"One thin trickle of blue blood cannot purify the plebeian vat, mother. I know very well what you are hinting at. Clarice is sweet, Clarice is pretty, Clarice has been well brought up, and had a genteel mother. She is, moreover, an only daughter, and will inherit two or three millions. She is one of those exceptionally good matches which you may count upon your fingers. The Lashmars are rich, but they might be richer; would rise to a much higher note in the social scale if they possessed those superfluous millions. Fabulous wealth is the thing people worship nowadays. It is not enough to be rich—a man to be honoured and talked about must be inordinately rich. Yes, I perfectly recognise the truth of all that. But all the same I am not going to be manœuvred into a marriage with Clarice

Danebrook. You can trot her out by-and-by, if you like: and if I fall in love with her I'll ask her to marry me. If I don't I won't, were she worth the wealth of Aladdin."

"Do you suppose I would ever wish you to marry anyone you could not love?" said his mother, masking her batteries. "I know you would only choose the best and worthiest. You are too proud to make one of those wretched matches by which some of your order have degraded their rank of late years. I should never fear anything of that kind from you."

"Well, no, I am not quite an idiot," answered Lashmar.

"As for Clarice, she is a sweet little thing, and I am really fond of her," continued her ladyship placidly; "but I don't think she is quite good enough for you. She has wealth, but she has not rank; and there is, as you say, always that unlucky tradition of the wheelbarrow."

"Dear old mother, we always think alike," said Victorian, bending down to kiss the dowager's broad brow.

His eyes sparkled with suppressed laughter. He knew her so well—knew that she had made up her mind that he was to marry Clarice Dane-

brook and no other, knew that to this end she had made much of the damsel, and been civil to her very common-place mother, and her sternly plebeian father. For no other than an interested motive would the great Lady Pitland's daughter have cultivated the society of a young person of vulgar lineage; yea, albeit a thin streak of the Montmorency blood had qualified the coarseness of the Danebrooks.

Victorian laughed at his mother's manœuvres, laughed most of all at the idea that she should think herself able to throw dust in his eyes; and he held himself in reserve for the future. He meant to do just what he liked with his life. He would have held himself free to marry a beggar-maid, like King Cophetua, had he so pleased. But he was not at all the kind of young man to feel drawn towards beggar-maids. He was worldly to the core, had been brought up to consider everything from the worldling's standpoint. He meant, when his time should come, to marry well, brilliantly if possible, to make such a match as should double his present importance in the world. No, he did not think that Clarice was good enough. Mere millions would not suffice. People would want to be told who his wife was; and for that

question to be answered fitly she should be the daughter of a duke.

It was October when the new Lord Lashmar came back to the Castle, with a chosen company of bachelor friends, old comrades of Eton and Oxford. His lordship came only for a flying visit, to see his mother, to shoot the pheasants, and to look about him a little. Lordship at one-and-twenty could not be supposed to care for a long residence beside that broad reach of the Avon amidst the decay of autumn woods. When the pheasants were thinned, Lashmar would be off again, to Paris or Vienna, as the case might be. He affected to hate London and London society. It lacked the glitter and ease of Continental life. He was not going to that dreary barrack in Grosvenor Square until he was obliged; which would not be before February, when Parliament would re-open and he would go to take his seat in the House of Lords.

The dowager was at Lashmar to receive her son and his friends. She had not left the Castle since her step-son's death. Her presence had pervaded the mansion like a dark and brooding cloud; or at least it seemed so to Stella, who shivered even at the distant sound of that voice.

Not once had they two met face to face since the day when those cruel lips told the child of her bereavement; but it was enough misery for Stella to know that the stern ruler of the house was within its walls, to hear her deep-toned voice from afar.

Lady Lashmar was not alone when her son arrived. She did not want his house to seem empty and dismal after the brightness of his continental surroundings. She had summoned other two dowagers, one frisky, and one strong-minded, to bear her company. The strong-minded dowager, Lady Clan Allister, had two strong-minded daughters, and these also were bidden. Their presence made an excuse for having Clarice Danebrook continually at the Castle. The weather was lovely. It was not too cold for lawn tennis. A very feeble cousin of Miss Danebrook, who was reading for his Divinity examination, made a fourth. The dowagers had their books and newspapers, their work-bags, and that everlasting occupation of letter-writing which holds all society in bondage.

The frivolous dowager was the famous Oriana, Lady Hillborough, who had been young and a fashionable beauty when William the Fourth was

king. She still wore her hair exactly as she had worn it at that period; but it was not the same hair—she had worn out a good many of those golden tresses, and had spent a small fortune at Truefitt's since the sailor king had been laid in the royal charnel house. She dressed as youthfully now as she had dressed then, and skipped about a room as gaily, re-arranging the furniture in that bright airy way of hers, famed for her exquisite taste in the composition of those pictures which fashionable drawing-rooms now offer to the enlightened eye.

“My dear, you should have a group of large palms at the other end of your room,” she exclaimed, surveying Lady Lashmar's morning room through her binoculars. “You have nothing to break the straight line of your end wall. Yes, of course, I know, those pictures of yours are priceless, and the palms will hide them; but you will get the idea of distance, vagueness, don't you know. The effect will be much finer.”

And then Lady Hillborough wheeled round and surveyed Clarice coolly, deliberately, through her glasses, which made her own eyes look as the eyes of a giant to those who happened to see them through those magnifying pebbles. Clarice

was standing by the window, wondering whether she was to be presented to the new-comer, or to be ignored, which she would have infinitely preferred.

"What a sweet child!" said Lady Hillborough in a loud whisper, when she had stared for about three minutes. "Introduce her to me."

Lady Lashmar obeyed, and Oriana took Clarice by the hand, made another deliberate inspection at nearer range, and then kissed the girl enthusiastically on both cheeks.

"I delight in pretty people," she exclaimed. "Of course you know you are pretty, child. Some people try to keep girls of your age from finding out their own prettiness; but it's all wasted trouble. If a girl were brought up on a desert island she would know all about her good looks; she would see herself reflected in some pool, like What's-his-name, in the Greek story—Jonquil."

"I think you must mean Narcissus, Lady Hillborough," said one of the strong-minded Miss MacAllisters.

"What does it matter, my dear, a narcissus and a jonquil are much the same thing," answered Oriana, who was not learned, and rarely read anything except the newspapers.

Lashmar and his friends arrived in time for dinner. He had spent a couple of nights in London, had arranged to meet his guests at the station, and to bring them down with him. There were two newly-fledged cavalry subalterns; a younger son who was going in for a political career, and fancied himself an embryo Canning; another younger son who was preparing himself for the family living; and a young man who was nobody in particular, but who was much better read, and more amusing than any of the other four.

They were all young, and they were a noisy crew. Clarice was afraid of them, and they were afraid of the two strong-minded Miss MacAllisters, who were intense politicians, and great upon the Eastern Question, with the complexities whereof they assailed the masculine mind at every opportunity. So there was a tacit avoidance of the feminine society provided by her ladyship.

"I thought you would have liked to find some nice girls here, Lashmar," she said to her son reproachfully, after he and his friends had been out shooting all day, and in the smoking room all the evening, while the Miss MacAllisters, who scorned accomplishments as futile, had sat in

different corners of the drawing-room, one reading Herbert Spenser, while the other devoured Darwin, and ostentatiously ignoring Clarice Danebrook's little bits of Chopin and dainty old ballads.

"So I should, mother," answered Victorian cheerily, "only I haven't seen any, except Clarice. She's nice enough, but quite impossible to get on with. She's so painfully shy."

"Her shyness would be got over in a very short time if you'd only talk to her."

"Oh, I can't talk to a girl when it's uphill work. The women in Vienna are so brilliant, so easy to get on with. As for your MacAllister girls I would as soon converse with a bluebook. One of them asked me yesterday morning what we were going to do with Cyprus, in the event of Eastern complications? Such a girl as that ought never to be allowed to set foot inside a country house. In fact, Oriana is the only agreeable person you have got about you. I have half a mind to propose to Oriana, only I'm afraid there'd be a sparsity of coin."

The dowager sighed with a vexed air, but said no more. She had hoped that Lashmar, fresh from the meretricious charms of fashionable

Viennese beauty, would have been struck by Clarice Danebrook's lily-like loveliness in all its purity of early girlhood. She was only eighteen, divinely fair, with features of most delicate mould, and eyes of heavenly azure. It was hardly possible to imagine a more beautiful girl in that particular style of beauty. There was not a flaw. She was of superior height, exquisitely graceful, with small hands and feet. Whatever coarseness there might have been in the Danebrook mould had been chastened by the judicious union with the Montmorencys. Nobody would ever have suspected Clarice of plebeian origin; and yet her father had coarse, hairy hands, and feet of serviceable breadth, sandy whiskers, and a potato nose. He was an admirable man of business, a liberal master, a staunch friend to the operatives whose labour had created his millions; but he had never tried or pretended to be a fine gentleman, though he had been born after his father had made a fortune, and had been educated at Rugby and Oxford.

Clarice was very sweet, and Lashmar gradually awakened to an idea of her sweetness. He began to leave his friends in the billiard-room, or the smoking-room, of an evening, and to sit

by the piano listening to those quaint old ballads, and those melodious bits plucked here and there out of the heart of a sonata or a symphony. Clarice was one of those musicians by instinct rather than by training who wander from flower to flower with a sweet capriciousness, stealing the honey out of every blossom: now a joyous little bit of Mozart, a rondo or a minuet; now an Andante, or an Adagio from one of Beethoven's grandest sonatas; now one of Chopin's wild wailing movements, half a dirge and half a war-cry.

"What a jolly lot you know," exclaimed Lashmar. "I wish you'd sing 'Barbara Allen' presently. I was outside in the corridor last night when you were singing it."

"Mill has a passage here which seems exactly to hit our present complications," said Janie MacAllister, looking up from her ponderous tome, "I do wish you'd let me read it to you, Lord Lashmar."

"Not for worlds. We should inevitably quarrel if you did. I detest Mill."

"But surely at such a crisis as this——"

"I don't care a straw about the crisis; we are always at a crisis. I don't even know what it means. I get dosed with European politics abroad

till I am simply imbecile upon all political questions. I want 'Barbara Allen.' ”

Clarice looked up and smiled at him, with her sweet childish smile. The Miss MacAllisters had been far from civil to her, and she did not love them. They resented her inordinate wealth, and disapproved of her beauty. A rich girl had no right to be pretty. Lady Lashmar's favouritism was also an offence. Clarice was petted and flattered while they were only tolerated —they who had cultivated their minds, and were able to enter the arena of argument upon equal terms with the sterner sex. The misfortune was that at Lashmar Castle nobody wanted to argue with them, except the foolish cousin, whose feeble brain they sometimes deigned to flood with their electric light. He who had never been able to grasp any one subject wondered at the wide range of these well-read damsels, who despised Paley with the contempt of long familiarity, and had Butler's Analogy at their fingers' ends, while the Greek Testament was child's play to them, and they were ready at a moment's warning to argue upon any disputed passage.

Clarice sang her old ballads, and Lashmar listened in a dreamy silence.

Yes, his mother was right. She was a very sweet girl—somewhat over-childish, perhaps, for her eighteen years, but passing lovely. Ermine robes and a coronet would not be too good for that delicate beauty. He wondered whether he was beginning to fall in love with her.

He fancied that she would be an easy conquest—for him. That shy and shrinking manner of hers argued a foregone conclusion. She had an awe-stricken way of looking up at him, as if his presence thrilled her. But he held himself in check, and did not mean to commit himself yet awhile. They were both young enough to wait.

One morning he let the shooters start without him, and strolled across the park and through the fields to the Hall, which was about a mile-and-a-half from the Castle. He wanted to see Clarice in the bosom of her family, to see whether her surroundings were too terrible, the father too suggestive of the original barrow. He had seen very little of the Danebrooks in his boyhood. This passion for Clarice was a new craze of her ladyship's.

The Hall was everything which the Castle was not. It had been built five-and-twenty years be-

fore, in the midst of a level expanse of meadow land, which, during that quarter of a century, had been in process of education into a park. But as there had been very few old trees to begin with the park was still barren: a waste of level turf with new plantations dotted about at intervals. A fine carriage drive went from the lodge gates to the Hall door, assuredly the most uninteresting drive in the county.

The Hall was an immense red brick house, in the modern Gothic style, red brick with stone facings. It was a very fine house, well proportioned, in fairly good taste; but nothing that the architect could do had been enough to subjugate that terrible air of newness which is the bane of such houses. There was a huge battlemented tower, which stared over the surrounding country and could be seen from afar for many miles; and there were battlemented stables and battlemented terraces; and there were acres of well-kept shrubberies, and a fish-pond, and fountains, and spacious conservatories—in a word, there was everything that money could buy. But money cannot buy antiquity, unless it takes the past at second hand. Clarice was very sorry that her father had not bought a dear old crumbly house,

in the heart of an overgrown old park, instead of building for himself this modern mansion, with all its comfortable appliances, its brand-new luxuries and conveniences, speaking-tubes and lifts, and hot water pipes and scientific ventilators. Clarice would rather have had one ghost than all those speaking tubes; she would have preferred lichen-covered stone walls to hot-water pipes and ventilators. Clarice fancied the house smelt of newly-made wealth. It had been furnished at one fell swoop by a great London firm, and although the picturesque had been duly considered, it was the modern picturesque, and lacked the mellow tones of real old furniture.

Mrs. Danebrook had just come in from her conservatories, where she snipped off the dead leaves and damaged a few of the plants every morning under the delusion that she was helping the head gardener. She was very stout, and could never steer herself through a conservatory without knocking over a pot or two. She was a large, placid woman, with small, regular features, which must have once been like those of Clarice, but which were now almost submerged in fat. She was very fair, with the lily-like fairness of her daughter, and she had flaxen hair, which her

daughter had carried out in a richer and warmer tint of golden brown. The daughter seemed to Lashmar to be a refinement upon the mother; but he told himself that as the mother was the daughter might be five-and-twenty years hence.

He met his hostess in the hall, and she took him to her morning room, where Clarice was lolling in an easy chair by the window, reading a novel, which was about the highest form of literature wherewith the young lady ever nourished her ripening mind. She rose in confusion at sight of Lashmar, as if it had been a demi-god entering suddenly; and the transparent skin was flooded with a lovely blush.

"My mother sent me to ask you over to tennis, this afternoon," said Lashmar, inventing a message on the spur of the moment.

"Oh, but I was going in any case," faltered Clarice; "dear Lady Lashmar asked me last night."

"She was afraid you would forget all about it to-day."

"There is no chance of her forgetting," said the mother. "She is so fond of Lady Lashmar. I feel quite jealous sometimes. I hardly see any-

thing of Clarice. But it is so nice for her to be at the Castle."

Mrs. Danebrook, *née* Montmorency, had an exaggerated reverence for rank. In the days when she had been a half-pay colonel's daughter, struggling to keep up appearances upon the narrowest means, she had always taken comfort from the thought that she was descended from princes. She had held her head high before lodging-house keepers and small tradesmen; had worn mended gloves and bonnets of doubtful freshness with a proud complacency which overcame the scorn of middle-class prosperity. And when Providence smiled upon her fresh young charms in the person of the broad-shouldered, sandy-whiskered proprietor of the largest foundry in Brumm, who met the young lady at the Stillmington Hunt Ball and fell in love with her on the spot, Viola Montmorency received the advances of the millionaire with the placid dignity of a princess. Another girl in her position, conscious of shabby surroundings and an impecunious father, might have disgusted her admirer by unwise encouragement. Viola stimulated his affection by a sweet reticence; and it was the colonel who brought matters to a head, and anchored

the delighted youth. Jonathan Danebrook had never had occasion to repent his precipitancy. His wife had one of those exquisitely easy tempers which are perhaps only a refined form of selfishness, but which allow the wheels of daily life to run as upon velvet. Mr. Danebrook indulged his wife's every whim; but her whims were of the mildest kind, and he had in compensation the privilege of doing exactly what he liked under all circumstances. Danebrook Hall was therefore a kind of earthly paradise, in which the fair young daughter moved like the spirit of youth and gladness, while the mother represented the calm contentment of maturity.

While Lashmar was dawdling in the morning room, turning over a pile of new novels and discussing their contents with Clarice, Mr. Danebrook came in from his model farm, fresh and breezy as the October morning itself, and bringing with him that compound odour of pigsty and stable which hovers about the person of amateur agriculturists, and in which they apparently delight.

It was Lord Lashmar's first visit to the Hall, and he was to Jonathan Danebrook as a prey, to be dragged off at once and paraded through hot-houses and stables, home farm and paddocks,

where the brood mares and their foals were one of the features of the estate. Lashmar was fond of horses, and did not mind the stables or the brood mares. He would have submitted even to the piggeries with a good grace if Clarice had been of the party; but Clarice never accompanied her father on these agricultural expeditions. She detested pigs and poultry, cattle sheds and farm yards. Those pretty little Louis Quatorze shoes of hers had not been made for tripping over cobbles, or across a ploughed field. There was nothing of the typical squire's daughter about her. She never hunted, and she only cared for the one well-trained horse which she was able to ride. She had never handled gun or fishing-rod, and her only idea of a dog was a Russian poodle. So Clarice stayed in the morning room and went on with her novel while Lashmar was inspecting horses and cows, pigs and poultry, until, amidst the splendours of a very fine assemblage of cochin-chinas, he was agreeably startled by the sound of a gigantic gong, which might have been heard half a mile off.

"Lunch," cried Danebrook; "come along, Lord Lashmar, I hope you're as hungry as a hunter after this long round."

"Upon my word I think I ought to go back to the Castle for luncheon," said Lashmar dubiously. "Her ladyship likes to have me when I am not out with the shooters. She'll take it unkindly perhaps."

"No she won't, when you tell her where you've been. Her ladyship has been uncommonly friendly to my wife and daughter."

"Miss Danebrook is my mother's favourite," replied Lashmar. "I never knew her take so warmly to any young lady."

"And Clarice positively worships Lady Lashmar—quotes her in everything; nothing is right unless it is modelled upon Lashmar Castle."

They went in to luncheon, and Lashmar, who had rather despised Clarice for her stay-at-home metropolitan habits, forgave her when he compared her pure and delicate beauty with the bronzed and weather-beaten countenance and roughened hair of the average country-bred damsel.

After luncheon Lashmar proposed that Clarice should walk to the Castle with him, and although Mrs. Danebrook would hardly have seen the fitness of such a proposition from a commoner she was willing to stretch the proprieties just a little

for the sake of a noble admirer, and to allow her daughter to stroll across the fields unchaperoned. So Lashmar and Clarice went across those rich Middleshire pastures, as gaily as Phillis and Strephon, in the sweet half-consciousness of dawning love, and were received most graciously by her ladyship.

The Miss MacAllisters and their mother had driven to meet the shooters, so there was only Oriana at home, and that dear lady always slept for two or three hours after luncheon, a siesta which enabled her to be as fresh as a *débutante* all the evening, nay, far into the small hours, did pleasure offer itself after midnight.

Lashmar and Clarice went off to the tennis ground and began a set without delay. The lawn was just under the windows of Lady Lashmar's morning room, and she looked up from the newspaper every now and then to watch them, pleased at the ripening of her plan. Yes, the fact was obvious. Lashmar was falling in love. No lesser influence than love would have taken him to the Hall; he who had always spoken slightingly of the newly rich, who detested the magnates and millionaires of Brumm. Clarice Danebrook's

beauty and sweetness had conquered all his prejudices.

Clarice was indeed fair to look upon, with the soft curly auburn hair fluttering on her low white forehead, and the gracious lines of her figure set off by the soft fold of her fawn-coloured Indian silk frock, a frock of elegant simplicity, just short enough to show the pretty little feet in the bronze shoes and fawn-coloured stockings, a frock whose Quakerish hue was relieved by a broad sash of Indian red, tied carelessly upon the left hip. The little toque hat was of the same Indian red, subdued yet glowing, and admirably harmonising with the ivory fairness of the wearer's skin.

They played two sets, and then went wandering off towards the Italian garden, which was at the other end of the castle, out of Lady Lashmar's ken.

It was upon this garden that the late Lord Lashmar's rooms opened. Clarice loitered to look in at one of the windows of the library.

"Oh, what a noble room!" she cried, peering in at the spacious apartment, with its wall of books facing her, crowned at intervals with white marble busts which gleamed in the shadowy in-

terior. The room seemed in half darkness as seen from the bright clear light of the garden.

"Do you know I have never seen the famous Lashmar library," she said, looking back at Lashmar. "I should so like to see it."

"Then you shall," he answered cheerily. "Strange that her ladyship should never have taken you in to look at the old Books of Hours and such like valuable rubbish. But the room has very sad associations for her, on account of my poor brother. He almost spent his life in that room."

"Yes, I know. How very good and sweet he was—such a lovely, mournful face. I only saw him two or three times, but I thought him so nice. He spoke so kindly, he had such a beautiful manner. What became of that pretty little dark-eyed girl, he adopted? I saw her with him one day; such an interesting little thing."

"Oh, she is still here, I believe, somewhere in the housekeeper's quarters," Lashmar answered carelessly.

"How strange that I have never happened to see her!"

They went in at a glass door, which opened into the late Lord Lashmar's sitting-room. Nothing

in this or any of his rooms had been altered since his death. Her ladyship meant to have a general turn-out of everything, and a complete re-arrangement of these rooms later on, when the sharp sad feeling of recent death should have worn away. She was not altogether without feeling upon the subject; although she had always wished for Hubert's early death, as the best possible arrangement Providence could make for everybody, dear Hubert himself included.

Long life could not be a blessing in his case. He would have only felt his afflicted condition more keenly as the years rolled on.

Clarice looked at the room with a mournful, awe-stricken air. It was so simply and prettily furnished; such charming engravings and photographs of French and German pictures on the walls; such novel and artistic china and bronzes and quaint little ornaments of all kinds, scattered upon the tables; such delightful reading-lamps and reading-easels; such low, luxurious chairs; above all, such a snug, homelike air. It was difficult to realise that he by whom those things had all been chosen, whose hand had cut the leaves of yonder magazines with that elephant's tusk, thrown carelessly across the books, as if he

had flung it there—difficult to realise that he had been lying in his grave for months, and would never look upon that place again.

The walls were lined half-way up with dwarf book-cases, and in those were the books of Hubert's own collecting. Clarice thought that some of these were passing dry; but that they were on the whole much better than those valuable volumes which Lashmar afterwards showed her in the great library.

He showed her the gems of the collection, in a somewhat perfunctory manner, not caring much about them himself, except as heirlooms, which fed his pride of race and place. He was well read for a young man; a keen critic of modern books; had dipped into most things; but he had not the collector's reverence for old books and old bindings. Clarice looked at them with the wide, wondering eyes of perfect ignorance. That shabby little volume in Italian worth a thousand pounds, just because there were only two of them extant—this and one other. It seemed ridiculous. She had been surprised the other day when her father gave a thousand pounds for an Alderney cow; but the Alderney was at least beautiful, a sleek, pettable creature, with great pathetic

eyes, while this little Italian book was distinctly ugly.

Her eyes wandered from the book to the room, which was lovely. Those marble busts, placed at intervals along the richly-carved cornice of the book-cases; the splendour of cut velvet curtains shrouding the windows and making a semi-darkness in the room; the two sculptured fire-places, lofty and imposing—all these things impressed Clarice. The Hall had been built and furnished with a reckless expenditure, and yet there was no room in it that gave this idea of dignity and grandeur. "One must begin by being noble before one could have such surroundings," thought Clarice, who worshipped rank.

Suddenly, in the midst of her contemplation of the room, she gave a little start, and touched Lashmar lightly on the wrist.

"What is that?" she whispered.

"That" was a small fragile figure, a little girl in a black frock, sitting at the further end of the room, perched high up on a library ladder, reading a big volume, which it was as much as her small hands and thin little arms could do to hold in its place, hugged against her stooping chest.

"By Jove!" exclaimed Lashmar, "it is the very child you were talking of, poor Hubert's *protégée*," and he went to the other end of the room, followed by Clarice, and looked up with a half-amused air at the queer little figure on the step-ladder.

"What are you doing up there, Stella?" he asked, not ill-naturedly.

The uncanny dark eyes looked down at him, so large, so black, in comparison with the small pale face; and then the thin black legs uncoiled themselves from the steps, and the child came down and faced her new master, still hugging the quarto in her lean arms. She stood and faced his lordship and the lovely young lady, looking with those great solemn eyes of hers from one to the other.

No longer a Reynolds's child, to be patronised and admired by the *dilettante* Rector. Not by any means a picturesque child in her present apparel. Her ladyship had taken pains to prevent any such foolishness under the new *régime*.

That thick straight fringe of hair, which had given quaintness to the childish face, had been carefully brushed away from the broad bare forehead, by command of her ladyship, who allowed

no such meretricious grace as a "fringe" in any of her dependents. The black stuff frock was made with a Quaker plainness, tight and prim and spare, and a holland apron carried out the idea of dependence and servitude. A very plain child assuredly in her present stage of being.

"What book is that?" asked Lashmar, pointing to the quarto.

"La Morte d'Arthur," she answered.

"What, can you read Old English?"

"Yes."

"My brother taught you, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"And pray, who gave you leave to come here to read?"

"Nobody."

"Frank, at any rate. I suppose you know you are doing wrong when you came here?"

"No," she answered doggedly. "I don't hurt the books; I am not in anybody's way."

"Do you suppose her ladyship would approve of your loafing here reading old books, instead of learning to be useful?"

"I don't care what her ladyship thinks. I don't care whether I please her or displease her. She has been very unkind to me."

"Oh, but you must not say that," said Lashmar, waxing stern. "You have every reason to be grateful to her ladyship; but for her, you would be in the workhouse, perhaps."

"If she was kind I should be grateful," the girl answered resolutely, unabashed, looking at him boldly with those wondrous eyes. "She took away all my books—the books Lord Lashmar gave me!"

The dark eyes filled with tears, which were hurriedly dashed away, as if the child were ashamed of them.

"Poor little thing!" murmured Clarice; and with a pretty pitiful air she patted the pale wet cheek with her soft white hand.

But Cinderella shrank from the touch as if she had been stung.

"Don't!" she cried angrily.

This last insolence provoked Lashmar's wrath.

"You are a very rude little girl," he exclaimed, "and you must never come into this room again. You have no right here or in any part of the house except the servants' quarters. You will have to be a servant by-and-by, and you must learn to live contentedly among servants. How

did you get into this room? The doors are locked."

"I came as you came—through the glass door."

"You have been here often, I suppose?"

"Yes, very often."

"You must never come again. Do you understand?"

"I understand that you are a cruel man," she answered defiantly, scowling at him, her heart beating tempestuously with fury. "I am glad you are only my dear Lord Lashmar's half-brother. If you had been really his brother I should have been very sorry to hate you—but you are not his brother, and I don't care how much I hate you."

She had been yearning for love and pity, thinking that perhaps when the new master came back he would be kind to her for his dead brother's sake. She had been yearning for pity; and yet she had recoiled from Miss Danebrook's gentle touch as if from an adder.

"You are a very horrid little person, as unpleasant as you are ugly," said Lashmar, going to the door and unlocking it, and throwing it wide open; "and now march, if you please. Put down that book, and make yourself scarce."

She had been hugging the quarto all this time. She laid it slowly down on a table, and as slowly walked out of the room, scowling to the very last.

"I am afraid she is not a nice child," said Clarice, shaking her head.

"She is a little demon, a veritable imp of darkness. I think my brother must have liked her on account of her outlandishness."

"Just as some people like a *Dachshund*," said Clarice.

CHAPTER VIII.

A YOUNG PROUD WOMAN THAT HAS WILL TO SAIL WITH.

STELLA went no more to the library. She had stolen round one day by the garden when the family was at luncheon and the coast clear, and finding the glass door open had gone in and read there for hours, safe in the solitude of locked doors. No one had missed her, for she had of late been allowed to carry her needle-work to her own little room and to work there in peaceful loneliness between dinner and tea time. Day after

day she had crept stealthily round from the hall door to that glass door in the late Lord Lashmar's study, left open for a few hours daily to air the rooms; and she had read to her heart's content, roaming at will among strange tales of fairy land and adventure, from Spenser to Sir Thomas Malory and Sir John Mandeville; and never had she been surprised until that afternoon when the new Lord Lashmar caught her in the act.

She felt herself a detected criminal; and she hated herself for the self-indulgence which had brought this shame upon her.

"I ought to have remembered that they are all *his* books now," she thought. She had always thought of them before as belonging to her dead friend: she had not fairly realised the transitory character of all such possessions. They had been Hubert's books, in her mind, and he had always encouraged her to read—he would not have grudged her the bliss of poring over those strange old stories.

She saw no more of Lord Lashmar, though he stayed at the castle till after Christmas, and entertained a good many visitors. The coming and going of guests occupied the servants much more severely than the old dull routine of the

late lord's time, and gave Stella more leisure and seclusion. Soon after Christmas, there came a great improvement in her life, for Lady Lashmar and her son went up to Grosvenor Square for the season, taking with them the greater number of the servants. Three housemaids, and a superannuated housekeeper, who usually lived in one of the lodges, were left in sole charge of the castle: and one of those housemaids was Stella's faithful friend, Betsy.

Under this new *régime* the child was free to roam about the house as she pleased: but she never re-entered the library. She would have read her own books again and again to satiety rather than she would have degraded herself by entering that forbidden room after Lashmar's insulting veto.

She had not forgotten one of his hard words. It was not often that she looked in the glass; but she never did so look without remembering that he had told her she was as unpleasant as she was ugly. Yes, no doubt she was ugly. The glass confirmed that hard speech; and perhaps the charge of unpleasantness was equally well founded. One happy change came over her life in this wintry season of the year, when she was

free to roam about the park or down by the river, or across the bare, bleak fields to the village, if she pleased. Her long imprisonment in ugly, uninteresting rooms had made that newly recovered liberty very precious to her. She was perfectly fearless, cared not how far she went alone, and Betsy was too busy to look after her, and was always satisfied if she appeared punctually at meal time.

She revisited all the spots which she had known with Lord Lashmar. She went to the boat-house and looked at his empty boats, under linen coverings, ghastly, as if he were lying in one of them dead. She wandered along the river bank, stopping to note this or that landmark, and to remember how utterly happy she had been in those vanished days.

Would she ever be happy again, she wondered? Never, surely, unless her father were to come back from that far country whither he had gone that night the house was burnt, the name of which she did not know. She had often questioned Lord Lashmar, and he had evaded her questions, not unkindly, but still firmly.

"You will know by-and-by, dear child," he had said, and she had felt that there was some

mystery which concerned her absent father, and that she must be patient.

If he would but come back now—now when she felt so lonely, so sorely in need of love and sweet companionship; some one to talk to her and to teach her as Lashmar had done.

Comfort, of some kind, was nearer than she thought. Coming through the little village street one day she saw a familiar figure standing at the gate of a cottage garden, gazing dreamily at the old church tower nestling in a hollow just beyond that sharp curve and sudden drop in the narrow road where the village inn stood out conspicuously, as if on the look-out for accidents to horses and wheels.

A bent old figure, with bare head and long gray hair and dim, pale eyes, aged by poring over dry-as-dust books. Yes, it was the mild companion of her happy childhood standing there, a leaf out of that lovely past which contrasted so strongly with her present desolation.

The girl ran to him and touched him on the sleeve.

“Mr. Verner, dear Mr. Verner, I am so glad!” she gasped breathlessly.

Slowly, and as if with an effort, the dim old

eyes withdrew themselves from the church tower, and gazed wonderingly upon the pale young face looking eagerly upward.

“Why, Stella! Are you still at the Castle? They told me you had been sent to school. Why did not you come to see me before?”

“I was not allowed to go out till her ladyship went away, and I did not know you were here. They said you had gone to London.”

“They were right, my child,” answered the old man, with a profound sigh; “I did go to London. I was in London nearly four months. A terrible place, child, a fearful place, when one has lost the habit of cities, as I have. The din of the crowded streets deafened me, the strange faces made me feel distraught. It is a dreary wilderness, Stella, for a man without friends; and I had no friends in London—no, not one. I thought I had many old college companions, old pupils—men who had pretended to love me when they were boys; but time had changed them into strangers. All doors were closed against me, very politely, Stella, but they were shut all the same, and I was alone and old and stupid, in that noisy wilderness of streets and squares, and

fine shops, and lighted theatres. A dreary desert for the friendless and poor, Stella."

"But your book," faltered Stella, remembering the old man's shrinking from the burden of celebrity, "*that* will win you new friends instead of the old ones who may have forgotten you."

"No, Stella, there are no friends to learning nowadays. Francis Bacon might wander in that stony labyrinth, die of hunger there for want of a helping hand. There are no Bacons wanted nowadays; learning is out of date. It was to get my book published that I went to London, Stella. I carried my manuscript from publisher to publisher, till I came to those that laughed in my face when I mentioned Aristotle, and asked me if I thought *he* was a likely kind of author to sell in penny numbers, or his complete works at a shilling? I was not to be beaten easily, Stella. I went to the great men first; they were kind and courteous, but told me the market was flooded with books upon the great classics; that no work of that kind had sold since Grote and Jowett; that my *magnum opus* was so much labour wasted, except for the pleasure I had felt in the progress of such an honourable work. That is the kind of thing the great publishers said to me. The small ones

openly laughed at me—politely or rudely, as the nature of the creatures prompted. There was no room in the world of letters for my great work on Aristotle. I might publish the book at my own cost if I liked, but it would involve an outlay of two or three hundred pounds. And I had thought that the work would bring me wealth and renown; I had shrunk from the glare and the dazzle of my future fame. Dreams, Stella, all dreams! The publishers awakened me: and now I know that I am only a foolish old man, born into this world too late to be of any use to himself or other people.”

“But you have your book still,” said Stella, in her grave, old-fashioned way—she had grown from a child to a precocious woman in her solitary studious life of the last eight months, had changed curiously in so short a time—“and if it is a great book, as Lord Lashmar said it was, you must be very proud of it.”

“I love it,” faltered the old man, with an involuntary glance at the window of the room that held his treasure,—“I love it as if it were a child. I am steadily going over all the old ground again, page by page, annotating, improving. Perhaps, years hence, when I am in the dust, a publisher

may be found to print that book—the world may discover that I have left it an imperishable legacy. But let us talk of it no more. Come in doors, and rest yourself, Stella; it is too cold to be standing here so long.”

He led the way into a cottage parlour, littered with the chaotic lumber of a student's days and nights—a table crowded with pamphlets and papers, books piled in every available corner, heaped upon the floor; dust, untidiness everywhere. The owner of the cottage had given up the struggle for neatness, and had allowed her eccentric lodger to have things in his own way. He was not a troublesome lodger, needed but little attendance, never grumbled at the cooking, paid his way punctually; but his long night watches were a source of fear to his landlady, lest in long poring over those dry-as-dust old volumes he should fall asleep and suffer the house to be set on fire.

“Have you been living here long?” asked Stella, looking at the chaos, and longing to put things straight with dexterous womanly fingers.

“Only since last November. Lord Lashmar has been good enough to give me a small pension, which I accept without compunction, as I know

that my dear pupil always intended to provide for my old age. But how could he think that I should outlive him—the old surviving the young? Yes, Lord Lashmar has been kind enough to provide for me, and I like to live here, near the old home and the old river we were all so fond of. And you, child, how has it fared with you since that fatal day?”

Stella was slow to answer. She struggled with herself in silence for a little while, the dark brows knitted in a frown; the crimson of passion kindling in the wan cheeks; and then she burst into tears.

The old man drew her towards him, gathered her upon his knees, sheltered her wet cheek upon his breast with almost maternal tenderness.

“My poor child! my poor child!” he murmured, “death was very cruel to you and me that summer day.”

“Oh! if we had only died too! Why did not God take us all together?” sobbed Stella: and then in broken sentences she told Gabriel Verner what her life had been like since he left the Castle—a life spent among servants, in the bondage of menial servitude.

“She took away my books too,” Stella went

on tearfully; "the books he gave me; my Greek and Latin books; my book about the stars; and Scott and Tennyson."

"Inexorable tyrant, to stifle that budding intellect."

"But Betsy contrived to get some of them for me. It was almost like stealing them, though they were my own—as much my own as this hand and arm. And I have gone on learning my lessons, and writing exercises, though there has been no one to tell me the faults."

"That need be so no longer, Stella. Come to me every day, if they will let you, and I will go on with your education. Yes," cried the scholar, with sudden enthusiasm, "it shall be the delight of my life to train this bright young mind. You"—with the rapture of conferring an ineffable boon, "you shall help me to annotate my book."

"I will!" said Stella, "and I will keep your room tidy, if you will let me. I know how to arrange books and papers, and keep them all in nice order, without disturbing anything. I used to tidy *his* papers when I was very, very little, when I could hardly reach up to the table."

"Yes, dear, you were always a handy little thing. I will go on with your education. Come

to me as often as you can; come whenever they will let you. I am not much of a gadabout. You will almost always find me at home."

Stella thanked him with all her heart, cheered and comforted by this new light. To take up the thread of her education where Lashmar had dropped it would seem almost a link with the past, with the life that had been so sweet. It would bring her nearer to the dead. She thought of him always as watching over her from the spirit world, regretting her degradation. And it would please him to know that she was carrying on her education with his dear old tutor.

She told Betsy everything; and Betty managed that by hook or by crook she should have time to go on with her education. All she had to do was to satisfy Middleham; and of late her sewing had been good enough even for that exacting personage; and she had also shown herself very deft and clever in putting the finishing touches to best bedrooms and morning rooms, arranging draperies, filling the flower vases, putting knick-knacks and indescribable elegancies in just the right places, instead of shoving things about stupidly after the purblind manner of the ordinary housemaid. Stella had spent many a morning at

this work when the Castle was full of company, and had won Middleham's blunt approval.

"I thought you were a fool, child, when I first took you in hand," said the queen-mother of the housemaids; "but I must say that I have found you a teachable, handy little thing, and very willing to take pains with your sewing; which is more than I can say for those overgrown young women from the village."

The all-powerful Middleham being thus conciliated by patient service, life had been made easier for Stella, even at the worst, than it had been; but it was easiest of all for her now when Middleham and her staff were in Grosvenor Square, and the state rooms and best bedrooms were all wrapped in shadow and silence. Under Betsy's friendly rule Stella was able to spend the greater part of her days with Gabriel Verner, and to learn as much as he felt inclined to teach her. Nor was this little; for it was a delight to the old man to resume the habits of years gone by with so docile, so receptive a pupil.

So day by day and every day, as the leaves unfolded and the flowers came peeping forth in the hedgerows and meadows—first, the season of daffodils, and then the season of king-cups, and

then the glad time of blue-bells, and onward even to the first of the dog-roses—Stella lived her own life, and learnt diligently in the great volume of classic lore, till even those modern Middleshire copses, that riverside of to-day, seemed peopled with ideal forms: so interwoven became the fables of the past with the realities of the present. And every day the girl's care helped to make the old student's life more pleasant, providing for and forestalling his wants, supervising his modest wardrobe, beautifying his cottage home, surrounding him with an atmosphere of womanly love and watchfulness.

Lady Lashmar was in London, in Paris, in Vienna, with her adored son, following him as a satellite follows a planet—not with him, but always near him. He had spoken in the House of Lords, and his speech had attracted attention; had been talked about as a wonderful speech for so young an orator: and it had been said by some of his party that Lord Lashmar was a young man who would make his mark.

“Old Lady Pitland's grandson ought to have something in him,” said the old-fashioned section of the party: and all Lady Lashmar's particular friends prophesied that old Lady Pitland's grandson

was to be one of the lights of the future, and as political skies at this period were cloudy, lights were wanted.

CHAPTER IX.

"BUT AS THE DAYS CHANGE MEN CHANGE TOO."

THE years had come and gone, and strange things had happened in the world of history and politics: wars and treaties, invasions and expeditions, changes in legislature, in science, in art. New whims, new fancies, new theories had rippled the river of time: but here at Lashmar Castle there had been no stirring events by which to distinguish the passing years. Life here had been monotonously placid and tranquil, yet not altogether happy. Lady Lashmar had drunk of the cup of disappointment in those slow years. Life had seemed to open with the buoyant rapture of a wedding march, when Fate made her son master of Lashmar Castle. She who was accustomed to rule had thought it the most natural thing in the world that she should rule her only son; not with open domination, but with delicate diplomacy, with tenderest maternal management.

Bitter had been her disappointment when she discovered that Lashmar was not so to be ruled. He was not an undutiful son. He treated his mother with affectionate consideration; but he was bent upon living his own life, and that was essentially a manly, independent life—a life of travel and sport. Yachting, mountaineering, salmon fishing in Canada, bear hunting in the Rockies, deer-stalking in the Highlands, had taken him far from his mother, and the possibility of maternal guidance. Within the last two years he had taken ardently to politics: but even political life was a life of severance from her ladyship, who was no longer in the vigour of health and strength, no longer able to hold her own in the turmoil of London society—a great deal faster and more furious, more capricious, fickle, and volatile than the society of Lady Pitland's time.

A great change had come over Lady Pitland's daughter within the seven years that had passed since Hubert, Lord Lashmar, had been laid in the family vault yonder, under the old church at the end of the park. The hand of affliction had weighed heavily on that proud spirit. Lady Lashmar's health had given way; a slow and gradual depression, indicative, as her physician blandly

hinted, of some obscure inward malady, had crept over that active mind, working slow and subtle changes, until little by little, with a gradual transformation hardly perceived by those who were constantly about her, the Lady Lashmar of the present had become an entirely different woman from the Lady Lashmar of the past. The severe lines of that handsome face had softened with the premature whitening of those soft masses of hair, which now recalled the Marie-Antoinette of Delaroche's famous picture. Yet despite this softer aspect the woman was at heart the same: proud as Milton's Satan, but with the melancholy pride of a disappointed life.

There had been times when she regretted her dead stepson; regretted the old days in which her influence had been paramount, and her boy, as a younger son with his own way to make in the world had been dependent upon the maternal purse for all his pleasures and indulgences. She had longed then for the day when he should stand in his brother's place. That day had come; and it had been the beginning of severance. Her boy was no longer to be gratified by gifts from the maternal hoard; he had no longer need of the maternal influence and counsel in the difficult

career of a younger son. He was his own master, rich, titled, with very little incentive to the creation of a career.

For five years Lady Lashmar watched her son's idle wanderings with disappointment and anxiety. She began to fear that he was no better than other young men to whom fortune has given too much, and with whom ambition is a dead letter. She was beginning to despair of him, when there came a political crisis, and Lord Lashmar came suddenly to the front. The Conservatives had braced themselves together for a final effort against a Liberal Government of five years' standing—a Government which its enemies declared to have afforded the most disastrous example of misrule ever known in the history of parliamentary legislature, and which its friends descanted upon blandly as a reign of peace and prosperity, and, as it were, a perpetual symposium of recumbent lambs and lions. Much in this crisis turned upon the acceptance or rejection of an important measure in the House of Lords: and it was then that Lashmar girded up his loins, and stood up in his place among the graybearded tribunes, and spoke as men seldom speak in that austere assembly, spoke with the fire and freshness, the

vigour and the strong feeling of inexperienced youth. The speech took his fellow-peers by surprise—all the more since the young peer had never had that training in the Lower House without which it is popularly supposed that no man can ever be a good debater. Lashmar awoke next morning to find himself a politician with a reputation. The bill went back to the Commons: and Mr. Nestorius, smarting under the sense of defeat, threw himself upon the country, just at that critical hour when his popularity was on the wane. Nothing can be more fatal than to dissolve Parliament on an ebb tide. The Conservatives came in with triumph; to their own exceeding surprise.

All this had happened two years ago, and now Lord Lashmar was a power in the Upper House, and occupied a position of some importance in the political and social world. He was one of those young men of mark about whose matrimonial views people speculate freely. Society wondered when and whom he would marry. Who was there good enough for him in these days of lamentable decadence? This question generally resolved itself into a discussion as to which of the heiresses of the year would have most money;

since it appeared obvious that Lord Lashmar would require money.

Seven years had gone by since Clarice Danebrook had played tennis on the lawn under Lady Lashmar's windows; and nothing had come of her ladyship's hopes in that direction. Clarice and Lord Lashmar had seen a good deal of each other in the London season which followed those quiet autumn days at the Castle. They had waltzed many a waltz, had met in many a crush upon the staircases of Belgravia and May Fair. They had even ridden side by side in the Row, Job Danebrook jogging quietly beside them on his weight-carrier, thinking of his latest improvements in machinery, or the possibility of a strike amongst his operatives.

People had said that young Lord Lashmar was anchored already. The worldly wise had lauded Lady Lashmar's good management. Just what one would expect from a daughter of old Lady Pitland. But nothing came of these rides and these waltzes after all. Lashmar went back to the Continent without having compromised himself by one too-tender word. There had been magnetic looks and gentle hand pressures, on the impulse of the moment, when they two stood side

by side amidst the crowd, nestling together, as it were, under the pressure of that silken throng, in an atmosphere overcharged with the scent of gardenias and tuberoses. There had been looks that had thrilled the simple Middleshire maiden; but nothing had come of those tender glances from dark gray eyes, under heavy brown brows.

Lord Lashmar had gone away, deeming that it was too soon for him to avow himself. He was not quite sure. He wanted time. And Clarice was assuredly too young to know her own mind. Precipitancy in these matters is always dangerous, often fatal; but there is seldom harm in delay.

He went, and he left Clarice lamenting, like Ariadne at Naxos: and, like Ariadne, she found a consoler.

She had been very fond of Lord Lashmar in her mild, almost infantine, way: and she had set her heart upon being a peeress. Perhaps she worshipped him chiefly because he was a nobleman of ancient race and high standing. She had seen him from the first invested with that aureole which her mother had taught her to revere—the golden halo of hereditary rank. And now he was gone, and she felt heart-broken, disappointed,

crushed. Her mother also was disappointed, and did not conceal her feelings. She told Clarice that Lord Lashmar had behaved shamefully, and that he was unworthy of a moment's thought. Notwithstanding which Clarice thought of him during almost every moment of the day and many a wakeful hour of the night; until the appearance of a new admirer of still higher rank afforded a spurious kind of consolation.

The new admirer was Lord Carminow, a marquis, and one of the most dissipated young men in London or Paris; a young man who, a year before he met Clarice, had the reputation of being industriously engaged in drinking himself to death; but who was said to have pulled up, on the brink of the precipice, as it were, and to be in a fair way to reform. His hand was still very shaky, and he was still obliged to put cayenne pepper in his brandy: but he drank less brandy, and his hand was less tremulous than it had been last year.

Lord Carminow met Clarice and her family at Schwalbach, whither Mr. and Mrs. Danebrook had taken their daughter with the idea that iron would revive her broken spirits. Lord Carminow was there, also in quest of iron. The marquis

and the maiden drank the waters together, and sat side by side to hear the band play in the gardens of the little casino. He was *not* an intellectual young man, and brain and nerves were alike shattered by long-established habits of intemperance. At an age when other men are in the morning of life, he was old and broken. It was a melancholy spectacle, piteous in the eyes of Mrs. Danebrook, who never for a moment forgot that the poor shaking hand belonged to a marquis. She was infinitely sorry for him, sorrowful, yet not without hope; for she told herself and all her intimate friends that if he could only marry a girl who loved him, he would no doubt become a new man. He was already on the right road. All he needed was to have his footsteps sustained by a faithful arm, his days cheered by sweet companionship.

After three weeks' acquaintance he proposed to Clarice Danebrook, and was accepted, with a kind of haughty carelessness on the part of the young lady, as if she took this coronet as her due, and despised the giver; with rapture on the part of the mother; but by the father with considerable and even outspoken reluctance.

"I suppose the world will say that my little

girl is making a fine match!" said honest Job Danebrook, "but unless you mend your habits, Lord Carminow, she will be one of the most miserable wives in London."

Carminow swore that his habits were already mended; and that with Clarice for his wife there could be no fear of relapse. The wedding took place late in the autumn, much to Lady Lashmar's indignation. She had done all in her power to deter Clarice; had told her in plainest language what manner of life Lord Carminow had been leading since he left Oxford, and even at Oxford; but Clarice had made up her mind to be a marchioness, and she was marble.

"He is very good-natured, and he is a gentleman," she said; "I can afford to take my chance. I shall do all I can to reform him."

"*You!*" cried her ladyship, surveying her from head to foot with a scathing look. "Poor baby! you little know what you are undertaking."

Clarice took her chance, and enrolled herself for ever among the marchionesses of England. She endured three and a half years of a most intolerable existence, before Lord Carminow finished that business of drinking himself to death, which he had begun so blithely at Christ

Church, in the dawn of manhood, when many of his fellow-commoners took toast-and-water for their dinner beverage. He was gone, and Job Danebrook was gone, and Clarice, Marchioness of Carminow, was established at Danebrook Hall, inordinately rich, and as lovely as in her earliest girlhood. Mrs. Danebrook lived with her daughter, and had been left very well off by the iron-master; but Clarice was mistress in all things, and a mistress on a very grand scale, modelling herself upon the great Lady Pitland, about whose little ways she had heard so much from Lady Lashmar.

There had been no issue of that unhappy union, and a distant cousin of Lord Carminow had succeeded to the marquise—an elderly man with a large family, who swooped down upon the estate like a flight of vultures, devouring everything. There was only a pittance of seven thousand a year for the widowed Marchioness, an insignificant addition to her own enormous income. The new marchioness and her daughters thought she ought not to have taken that pittance.

And now in these days of her widowhood Clarice was again almost as a daughter to Lady Lashmar, who had much need of solace and

society in her present depressed state of health; need also of much attendance, wanting to be waited upon with exemplary patience, altogether a hard and difficult mistress.

She had three slaves, who were always in attendance upon her—Barker, the patient and homely maid of thirty years' service; Celestine, the expert Abigail, with deft fingers and faultless taste in the *confection* of a cap or the arrangement of a drapery, were it only the sweeping folds of an Indian shawl worn over an invalid's shoulders. Lady Lashmar had taken to dress as elderly women dress when they have renounced the pomps and vanities of the world. She rarely wore anything but black brocade or velvet, and she wore a cap, and generally had her shoulders draped with some rich shawl. She looked distinguished still; but she always looked old, and she very often looked ill.

Her third attendant occupied a nondescript position, was hardly a servant, though she was treated quite as cavalierly as the lowest servant, and was not quite a companion. She was a tall and slender girl, with a pale olive complexion, a small head crowned with ebon hair, and the most wonderful dark eyes that were ever seen out of

Andalusia. She was always dressed with a severe simplicity, in a black cashmere gown, high to the throat, with a small linen collar, and a long plain skirt. This was as much a uniform with her as it was with the housemaids, whose afternoon gowns were just of the same colour and fashion; yet no one would have taken her for anything but a lady. There was a distinctive grace and dignity in every line of the tall, straight figure. The head had the imperial carriage of a Cleopatra.

This was Stella Boldwood, now nineteen years of age, and promoted within the last two years to the post of her ladyship's reader and amanuensis.

Not of her own accord, but very reluctantly, had Lady Lashmar accepted her stepson's *protégée* in this intimate familiarity. The girl had been forced upon her by circumstances and the officiousness of her other dependents. The time had come when she, who had been a great reader, had begun to feel the fatigue of reading too much for her broken nerves—the time had come when a chronic languor made it an effort to her to hold a book or follow the lines of a page. She was only fit to recline in her easy chair and listen while some subdued voice read aloud to her, and

the accents of that voice must be those of refinement.

Celestine was, of course, impossible for English reading, and the twang of her original faubourg made even her French detestable to her ladyship's sensitive ear. Barker was worse. The doctor suggested Stella, whom he had seen very often when sitting in the cottage parlour, where he dropped in once or twice a week to chat with old Gabriel Verner. He had attended the old man every winter during sharp attacks of bronchitis, and he had seen how Stella excelled as a nurse.

"I know something of the young lady," said Mr. Stokes.

"Please don't call her a young lady, my good Stokes," remonstrated her ladyship, "she has been brought up among servants, as a servant. You must remember how I disapproved of my poor stepson's folly about that girl."

"You may bring up a fox in a litter of terriers, but he'll be Reynard all the same at the end of the chapter," said Mr. Stokes. "That girl is a lady. She has good blood in her veins, I'll go bail. And she got her early training from the late Lord Lashmar, who was one of the most intellectual men I ever had the honour to know.

You can't undo that, Lady Lashmar. You may order the girl to handle a broom and twirl a mop, and she may think it her duty to obey you, but she is a lady all the same."

"I think all girls are ladies now-a-days," retorted the invalid impatiently. "A great wave of refinement has swept over our people. Even country girls are no longer buxom and sturdy and active. They are all pallid, and languid, and lady-like, stuffed with science primers and fine notions, and they want to do as little work as possible. I suppose we must call this paragon of yours a lady-help. I want some one to read to me, but unfortunately I dislike that girl of yours."

"Prejudice, Lady Lashmar, idle prejudice," replied Mr. Stokes, who always said what he liked to her ladyship. "Let her make a beginning, and if you find her disagreeable you can send her about her business."

"Of course," answered Lady Lashmar. "Perhaps she may be rather more endurable than a stranger. I abhor strangers."

So Stella was told one morning that her mission would be to act as Lady Lashmar's

reader and amanuensis until further notice; and from that hour she was a slave.

Her life had been easy enough of late years, easy even to pleasantness. The rule of the uncompromising Middleham had been made very light for her, when that autocratic personage found that she was willing, industrious and conscientious, and that whatever she did was well done. She had been able, by early rising, to get her work done before the one o'clock dinner; and then she had been allowed to do what she liked with her afternoons, always provided she reappeared at the five o'clock tea, which of late she had taken with Mrs. Barker in the little room upstairs, a priceless privilege, since it spared her the gossip and uncongenial joviality of the still-room. Little by little the girl had drifted, as it were, into a life of her own, apart from those servants whose existence the dowager wished her to share. She had been among them for a little while, but she had never been one of them. As she grew into girlhood the difference between her and them became more sharply defined. They felt that she could never be one of them, and her presence became an embarrassment. They were very glad that she preferred solitude to their friendly com-

pany, and a quiet cup of tea in Barker's room to their own noisy meal. She had always such old-fashioned ways, they said. Strange that a child should be such a blue-stockings. But of course that was all the late Lord Lashmar's doing. He had brought her up as no child ever was brought up before. She had been dry-nursed upon books.

As the years wore on Stella was almost happy. The afternoon hours of every day were spent with Gabriel Verner. He was old and feeble, and sometimes very prosy; but he was a mine of information, he loved learning for learning's sake, and he loved Stella. He carried on her education from the point at which Lord Lashmar had left off. He cultivated her love of the classics, reading Homer and Virgil and Horace with her again and again, dwelling on the passages he loved, ingraining their beauties into the very mind of his pupil. He taught her French and German, and together they read the classics in both languages. They had nothing to distract them from their books, no visitors, no pleasures. In summer time they sat in a quiet spot on the edge of the river, a little nook below the towing path, out of everyone's way, under a willow which Lashmar had

loved. In winter they sat opposite each other by the trimly kept hearth, like two old cronies.

It is wonderful how much reading may be got through in seven years by a young enthusiast and a veteran student, when the world has no claims upon either, and offers no temptations to youth or age. Stella had read more than many fairly cultivated men of forty, when she was suddenly called upon to do suit and service to Lady Lashmar. From this time her regular studies with Gabriel Verner were at an end, and those gentle cares of hers which had made his old age so easy had now to be performed under difficulties. She could only steal away from the castle now and then for a brief visit to her old friend, just time enough to see to his comforts and to talk to his landlady, who was kindly but stupid, and whom Stella had been gradually training into proper carefulness of her lodger.

"You do spoil the old gentleman so, miss," remonstrated the good soul.

"Old people require a little spoiling, Mrs. Chipp. But nobody could spoil Mr. Verner. He is so good and so unselfish."

"Well, miss, nobody can deny that he is a nice easy gentleman to get on with, and if I

wasn't afraid of his setting the house on fire I should say he was the best lodger I ever had; much better than they young curates as most people set such store by; and a permanence too, which the best of curates never was."

"You must be more attentive to him than ever, Mrs. Chipp, now that I am so seldom here," urged Stella; and Mrs. Chipp promised that the student should lack no fostering care.

It was with a rebellious heart that Stella entered Lady Lashmar's morning room on the first day of her new service. Mr. Stokes had endeavoured to awaken her sympathy for the stern dowager. He had hinted to her that the disease from which Lady Lashmar suffered must sooner or later be fatal, that all the rest of her life must be spent under the shadow of affliction.

"She is very much to be pitied, poor soul," said the kindly Stokes; "all the more so, perhaps, because she is not the kind of woman to invite pity."

Yet even after this appeal Stella felt nothing but aversion as she stood, tall and straight as a lily stalk, at the foot of her ladyship's sofa.

She was thinking of that summer afternoon seven years ago when Lady Lashmar had sat be-

side her bed, swathed in inky crape, stern, pitiless, and had told her of her benefactor's death—how all life and this bright world had changed to darkness at the sound of that cruel voice. Yes, it was the same face—cold, faultless, un-beautiful, looking at her with disdainful eyes.

She had not been face to face with Lady Lashmar since that dreadful day. She had lived under her roof and eaten her bread, and had felt the sting of her tyranny; but the mistress of the Castle had been no more visible to her than the Mikado to the meanest of his subjects. And now she looked at her oppressor thoughtfully in the June sunlight, noting the changes time had wrought.

Yes, it was the same countenance, in no wise softened by affliction; but the hair was white, and there were traces of suffering and of premature age.

"I require a person to read to me for some hours daily, sometimes even late at night; and I am told that you have contrived to educate yourself with Mr. Verner's help, and that you know how to read aloud. Is this so?"

"I have read aloud to Mr. Verner," the girl answered quietly.

"Often?"

"Habitually."

There was no waste of words on either side.

"Then you can begin at once. There are my books" (pointing to a revolving bookstand within reach of the sofa, a stand which held about forty volumes). "Invalids are very capricious, and require change of mental food. You can begin with Charles Lamb, Elia's Essays—that one upon old china, for instance. I am in a lazy mood to-day, and would rather not be called upon to think."

She was lying on a luxurious sofa, propped up with pillows. She spent a considerable portion of every day in this recumbent position, but she was not confined to her sofa or to her room; and when there was company at the Castle, or when her son was at home, she generally dined downstairs, and held her own with the old air of supremacy which had been to her as a royal robe. She was not easily to be beaten even by bodily pain, or the vague languors of obscure disease. She meant to make a good fight to the end.

Stella seated herself in a low chair a little way from the sofa, and began to read. She read

Lamb for an hour, and then she was told to lay aside Lamb and to take up a volume of travels in Bokhara, a new book which her ladyship had just received; and when the travels wearied she was told to resume the last poem by Browning, at the page which her ladyship had marked.

She was allowed to read on like a machine. She read for three hours without respite, and then she was told that she might go.

"You read very well!" said her ladyship, with cold approval; "I daresay I shall want you again late in the evening. Stay, you can arrange my pillows before you go."

Stella bent over the white Marie-Antoinette head, and with light and careful touch adjusted the heaped-up pillows, and then, without a word of thanks from the invalid, she left the room.

As she went out by one door Barker entered by another.

"Yes, I think she will do!" said Lady Lashmar. "She has a sympathetic voice, and reads well. This is one of my bad days, Barker; I shall not leave my room."

At nine in the evening Stella was summoned again. The lamplit room with its profusion of roses seemed a revelation of long-forgotten beauty

and elegance, after the puritanical plainness of the servant's quarters. The golden-brown brocade curtains and clouds of Indian muslin draping the fine old windows, the rich carmine of old Sevres vases and candelabra, the Chippendale whatnots crowded with richly bound books, the low chairs and dainty little tables offering every possible form of convenience for books, or flowers, or cup and saucer; the old Indian screen and tall young palms in Satsuma bowls. Such surroundings were new to Stella, after the prim commonness of the housekeeper's parlour, with its horsehair sofa and pembroke table; and yet she felt more at home here than in Mrs. Middleham's room.

Lady Lashmar looked wan and faded in the lamplight, and the sickly white of her complexion was accentuated by the rich dark tints in her brown plush tea gown. A diamond and sapphire brooch fastened her fichu of old English lace, and the semi-transparent hands glittered with costliest rings. There was here no intention of letting down the pride of womanhood or station, even under the grip of a fatal malady.

"You can go on with Balaustian!" she said.

Not a word more. No praise or thanks for the afternoon's work; no invitation to take a cup

of tea from the old silver salver, placed handily on the delicious little tea-table beside her ladyship's sofa. Jonathan Boldwood's daughter was to be treated only as a serf beneath that roof. She had been reared there according to the laws of slavery; and there is no reason that a slave should be treated any better because he happens to have cultivated his intellect.

She read till eleven, without any sign of fatigue. She had so trained herself during those long afternoons when she had sat on a stool at the old student's feet, reading the authors he loved; saving the poor old faded eyes. She had read on unconscious of the passage of time, just as she read now, absorbed by her own delight in Browning's verse, with its undertones of deepest thought.

At eleven Lady Lashmar dismissed her, with briefest good-night.

Her duties as reader went on for months, without variation. She spent at least half of every day in Lady Lashmar's rooms, and was often summoned late at night to sit beside her ladyship's bed, and to read till three or four o'clock in the morning. She performed her task with a cold placidity which was agreeable to the

highbred dowager, who detested fuss, and would have been disgusted by servility or officiousness. Later on Lady Lashmar allowed her slave to write all her letters to indifferent persons, and sometimes even a letter of friendship; but the amanuensis was never employed in writing to her ladyship's son. Those letters were always in the mother's penmanship.

Stella had filled this office for nearly two years, and had been of the utmost service to Lady Lashmar. Yet the stern dowager had but in the smallest measure relented of her original aversion from her stepson's *protégée*. She used her as a companion and slave, but she never forgot that this thoughtful-looking girl with the large dark eyes was Jonathan Boldwood's daughter, and that the venom of Radicalism ran in those blue veins which showed in such delicate tracery upon the slim white hands and on the ivory pallor of the forehead. The old prejudice still existed in full force, and the dowager in no wise relaxed her hauteur because Stella Boldwood had become useful to her. In her inmost heart she was angry with the girl for the very gifts which made her an invaluable companion. She resented that force of character which had

enabled the child-dependent to rise superior to her surroundings, and to make herself a lady in manners and superior to most ladies in education. She was angry at that native grace, which gave elegance even to the black merino gown which was the livery of servitude. Nothing could vulgarise Stella, or reduce her to the level of her ladyship's other dependents. Barker had one day ventured to suggest that as the girl was now virtually her ladyship's companion she should have some prettier gowns—a black silk, for instance, or at any rate, one of those fine French alpacas which Celestine always wore, a material which combined all the lustre and softness of silk with the merit of never wearing out. But Lady Lashmar replied angrily that the girl was to wear such gowns as the housemaids wore and no other.

“She is quite vain enough as it is,” said her ladyship. “I believe she spends hours in dressing that hair of hers, and training her eyebrows.”

This was a cruel attack upon Stella's pencilled brows, whose bold clear line gave such character to the low broad forehead.

Barker was indignant at this ungenerous

treatment of a girl who sat up till two or three o'clock in the morning three times a week on an average to beguile the tedium of her ladyship's wakeful nights. But Stella made no complaint against the inevitable black merino gown. She was glad when for the convenience of Lady Lashmar she was transferred to a pretty little bed-chamber on the principal floor, close to Barker's den, where she now took all her meals, and which she was allowed to use as her own sitting-room. She was thus removed entirely from all association with the other servants: and Barker was one of those kindly souls who with but the slightest modicum of education have all the instincts of good breeding. Stella had never revolted against the society of Barker, while Barker's niece Betsy was always dear to her as the friend of her childhood.

And now it was the end of September, and Lord Lashmar and a little knot of distinguished visitors were expected at the Castle, some intent on the slaughter of the pheasants, others only desiring rest and respite after the fatigues of a London season.

Among these latter was Mr. Nestorius, the great party-leader, who having retired from poli-

tical life finally, after the defeat of his Ministry, now, like Dante's swimmer, looked back, breathless after striving with the waves, upon the raging sea of politics from the calm shore of domesticity.

Nestorius had been a *protégé* of Lady Pitland when his brilliant career was in its dawn; and the friendship with that wonderful old lady and her family had never been interrupted, albeit their political opinions were as the poles asunder. And now that the politician's distinguished career was a closed book, and that he had withdrawn into the haven of private life, without the faintest intention of ever refitting his damaged craft again to encounter the buffets of ocean, it pleased Lady Lashmar that the great man should enjoy some portion of his well-earned leisure under her roof.

She talked of him beforehand more than of any other of her guests, and arranged that the very best of the best rooms should be given to him.

"There are cases in which rank counts for nothing," she said. "Mr. Nestorius must always be first everywhere. He is not only great as a statesman; he has won his laurels as a poet, and the interpreter of classic poetry; and our respect

is all the more due to him since he has retired from office for ever—always a melancholy fact to consider when a career has been so great, although so mistaken."

"Is there no possibility of Mr. Nestorius returning to public life, whenever the Liberals come into power again?" asked Stella simply.

Lady Lashmar gave her a look which ought to have frozen her.

"The Liberals have seen the last of their misrule," she said. "The country has been taught a lesson which it is not likely to forget."

"Yet history shows that people always do forget," argued Stella. "Opinion follows opinion, as wave follows wave; the world would stagnate if it were otherwise."

"Pray do not argue. I do not care for Mr. Verner's ideas at secondhand," said Lady Lashmar haughtily.

She encouraged the girl to talk sometimes, snubbed her mercilessly at other times, and was never really kind. Yet it so happened that this kind of life, slavery as it was, suited Stella's temperament. Good books and gracious surroundings were at present her only idea of bliss in this world: and as Lady Lashmar's companion she

had these in abundance—the best of books, old and new, elegant rooms to live in, and the right to wander at will in gardens or park during her brief intervals of leisure. For the rest she was penniless, had no remuneration for her labour, not even the wages of an under-housemaid; and now that Mr. Nestorius and other great people were bidden to the Castle, Stella knew that her servitude would be in no way altered, that she would see little or nothing of those great ones. She sat at the little writing table in the window of her ladyship's morning room, waiting for further orders, while Lady Lashmar and the beautiful widow, Lady Carminow, sat on each side of the hearth, brightened by the glow of a small wood fire, and discussed the expected visitors.

“Remember, you are on no account to desert me while these people are in the house,” said Lady Lashmar, with an imperative air, almost as a mother talking to a daughter. “I shall expect you to take nearly all the trouble of receiving them off my hands; you must be almost as the mistress of the house.”

“It will be very nice,” answered Clarice, with her slow, dreamy smile. “I adore Mr. Nestorius, though I know he did his utmost to ruin this

country when he was in power; but he is such an orator, the finest I am told, since Lord Chatham; and he is such a thoroughly poetical man, and such a scholar! His translation of *Æschylus* is quite too lovely. I am sure it must be ever so much nicer than the original."

Stella's lips moved, and a little impulsive movement disturbed the repose of her attitude. She had discussed this translation of Mr. Nestorius's with Gabriel Verner. They had gone over it line by line and it had seemed to them that the *Agamemnon* of Mr. Nestorius was a treason against the Greek playwright, so fully had the statesman given the reins to his own vivid imagination; but it was not for her to give utterance to her doubts in that room, or to air her knowledge of Greek before Lady Carminow.

"I am getting some new frocks on purpose for your people," said Clarice, who was fonder of millinery than of literature.

The only books she really enjoyed were French novels, and the newest school of English poetry. Her intellectual fibre had a certain limpness which required to be shocked and startled into attention. She went to sleep over Tennyson or Browning, and George Eliot made her head ache.

"Who is making your frocks?" asked Lady Lashmar, faintly interested.

"Mrs. Marshall."

"She is very good, but a desperate robber. Her prices are iniquitous."

"But she drapes a gown so deliciously. There is an indescribable something which is worth any money she likes to charge. I never grumble at her bills. I have even gone so far as to shake hands with her when I have wanted a gown in a desperate hurry."

"How long is it since you have seen Victorian?" asked Lady Lashmar absently, as if her thoughts had wandered ever so far from Mrs. Marshall's bills.

"Oh! ages and ages; not since the spring. Yes, once in the summer, at a crush at the Foreign Office. We had five minutes together on the stairs; five minutes that brought back the thought of old times, before I married poor Lord Carmi-now. I felt as if I were a girl again."

"You are not much more than a girl. He was very attentive, I suppose?"

"Oh! he said some rather sweet things; but sweet things are only the small change of society nowadays. They mean no more than the crystal-

lised violets one nibbles at dessert. Lord Lashmar is a great man, quite absorbed in politics."

"I hope he will never become a walking blue-book like some of them!" said Lady Lashmar vaguely. "I am proud that he should make his mark in the world; but I should like to see his domestic happiness secure before I die."

"Dearest Lady Lashmar, pray do not talk of dying. You have a long life still before you, I hope."

"I should be glad to hope so too, if I could, Clarice; but I can't. I am obliged to adopt the Horatian philosophy—abjure extended hopes, and enjoy my life as much as I can in the present. I want to see my son married, and married as I should wish!"

"That is just the one thing you must not hope for," answered Clarice, with a touch of bitterness, as if that placid temper of hers were faintly stirred by the memory of an old wrong. "Men never marry to please their fathers and mothers; and the sons who have had ideal fathers and mothers are almost sure to marry badly. It is only the men who have seen a cat-and-dog life exemplified in their parents who are careful in choosing their own wives."

"It would break my heart if Victorian were to marry beneath him."

"Oh! I don't suppose he will do *that*," said Clarice, with supreme hauteur. "He will marry in his own rank, I have no doubt. He has none of those horrid low instincts which lead young men to make friends of their stablemen and to admire chorus-girls. But he may marry a woman who has been more talked about than you would like; although as so many women of fashion are talked about nowadays that would hardly be supposed to matter."

"It would matter very much to me, Clarice," answered the dowager sternly. "I wonder you can talk so lightly!"

"I only talk as other people talk. Things do not count now as they used when my mother was young and Prince Albert was alive. Is it not strange that one good man's death seems to have loosened all the bonds that held society together? At least, mother says it is so. She puts our moral decadence all down to the untimely death of the Prince Consort."

Stella was often a quiet hearer during such conversations. Her presence counted for nothing. Lady Lashmar and Clarice talked as freely before

her as if she had been a footman. She was not of their rank or of their world, and so was in a manner non-existent. Lady Carminow would honour her with a passing nod as she entered the room—the most infinitesimal thing in nods—and another as she left; but in the interval between entering and leaving the room the lovely widow appeared utterly unconscious of her existence. Lady Carminow, be it observed, was more thoroughly a peeress than if she had been born in the purple. The consciousness of her exalted rank never left her. It was for this she had suffered the slow agonies of union with a man she loathed; for this she had shrunk shuddering from the ravings of *delirium tremens*, endured the unspeakable horrors of habitual intemperance; and she was bent upon making the utmost of the privilege she had won so dearly. The once gentle and pliant Clarice had become the haughtiest of women, but as she had still the placid Montmorency temper—the constitutional amiability of the lymphatic lily-complexioned order of womankind—people managed to endure her pride of rank, and even the oppressive sense of her wealth.

Between Lady Carminow and Stella there

was a silent antagonism. Neither had forgotten that day in the library when Stella had shrunk from Clarice's pitying touch as if it had been the sting of an adder. There had been no renewal of compassionate feeling on Lady Carminow's side. She was jealous of those gifts which made Stella such a valuable companion for Lady Lashmar. She resented the girl's superior cultivation, and spoke of her sneeringly as a blue-stockings.

"She can read Greek and Latin. How very absurd! It is only a smattering, of course."

"Old Mr. Verner tells me that she knows more than many a B.A.," said Lady Lashmar. "My poor foolish stepson crammed her with learning from the time she was able to read. She has been nourished upon books."

"What a pity she cannot get a degree. I wonder you don't send her to Girton or Nuneham. She would be more in her place there than in this house."

"She is very useful to me. I could not possibly spare her."

"Oh, but companions can be got by the hundred. You have only to choose from a column of advertisements. There is a fresh column every

morning in the *Times*. I have often looked, thinking I should like to get some one for mother; some one who would amuse her all day, and take her quite off my hands, don't you know."

"Needy young women in want of homes may be had in shoals, I have no doubt," answered Lady Lashmar; "but it is not easy to get a really good reader. Stella has a sympathetic voice, and reads well. I could not do without her."

"She is not *simpatica* with me," said Clarice, languidly. "I am very sensitive about my surroundings. I should not like your Stella in my room after midnight. Those great black eyes and that pale face would frighten me. I should have an idea that I was going to be murdered."

Lady Lashmar smiled, as at the nonsense talk of a beautiful child. She was very fond of Clarice, whose loveliness gladdened her eye, and whose intellectual inferiority was a perpetual compliment to her understanding. She was hoping great things from the coming October, which would bring Victorian and Clarice together day after day in the easy-going intercourse of a country house. Her own breaking health would be an excuse for leaving her son and the lovely widow very much to their own devices. Lady

Carminow would take the place of the mistress of the house, and Lashmar would have to consult her about everything. Could he resist so much beauty and sweetness? He had been proof against those charms once: or he had shilly-shallied and had lost his chance. If he had not been proof, if it had been a case of shilly-shally only, and he had been hard hit all the time, how gladly would he seize the golden opportunity which his mother had prepared for him! It is true that he might have made opportunities for himself during the years in which Lady Carminow had been a widow. But there are men who will make no effort in these matters, who require to have fortune flung into their laps. And then Lashmar had been absorbed by politics ever since that famous speech which had helped to secure the majority that overthrew the late Cabinet.

Lord Lashmar arrived, fresh from a yachting excursion in the Hebrides, bronzed and bearded, broad shouldered, muscular, the manliest of young men, with a fresh open-air look about him, yet intellectual withal. It was a fine face, as even Stella was fain to confess to herself as she with-

drew from the morning room after his lordship's arrival, leaving mother and son together.

Yes, it was a fine face, but far from a pleasant face; Stella thought. There was the haughty expression of his grandmother's old Northumbrian race—the Fitz Rollos—who claimed to be descended in a direct line from those Norsemen who swooped like a flight of sea-birds on that bleak coast in the dim beginning of English history.

Stella had been told about those Norse robbers of the long-ago, from whom it was such unspeakable honour to be descended. Some innate taint of Radicalism made her slow to perceive the glory of such lineage; but she thought to-day that Victorian, Lord Lashmar, had just the kind of face which would have looked its best under a Norseman's helmet, or at the prow of a piratical craft, with roughened hair blown by the north sea wind, and keen eyes looking landward, ready for rapine and carnage, so soon as that light foot should strike the shore.

She could fancy him holding his own valiantly amongst the prosy old gentlemen in the House of Lords.

He gave her a distant bow as she passed

him, a salutation which she acknowledged with an almost imperceptible bend of the long, slim throat, while the look in those dark eyes of hers expressed absolute dislike. She had not forgotten his parting speech in the library seven years ago; or the air with which he had flung open the door and told her to "march." He would tell her to march again perhaps, if she should happen to be in his way at any time. This was the first time they two had met face to face since that day.

He looked after her wonderingly till the *portière* fell behind her, and he and his mother were alone.

"Your *protégée* has improved!" he said. "She is not half so ugly as she was seven years ago."

"Pray don't call her my *protégée*. You know she is a legacy from poor Hubert, an incubus which his Quixotism has imposed upon me."

"But I take it she is useful to you, or you would have sent her about her business before now. She fetches and carries for those two lazy old maids of yours—Barker and Celestine—I suppose?"

"She reads very well; that is the only way in which she is useful to me. And now, Victorian, let us talk of yourself and of the future. I hope

you are going to stay here all the winter—till the House re-opens!"

"Would you like me to stay?"

"Of course I would, dearest. What have I to live for but your society? Life is a blank when you are away from me."

"That is hard, mother dear, when I have been so much away! You make me feel that I have been an undutiful son."

"No, no! you are not to be the slave of a too exacting love. Mothers are even more tiresome than wives. It was right that you should see the world: but now that you have travelled, and have seen so much, the time has come for settling down quietly, for assuming your right position as an English nobleman. All our greatest statesmen have been men who spent their lives at home. Our people are jealous of Continental influences, and dislike Continental habits."

"My dear mother, I am not such a caterer for popularity as to fashion my manners or my life to please the mob; but I shall be glad to spend more of my days with you now—now that I am growing middle-aged."

He had hesitated before those concluding words; saddened by the thought that the limit of

those days which his mother and he were to spend together was already marked by Fate, and seemed to him now to lie within a definite distance. There was no longer that vagueness of prospect which makes the horizon of life seem infinite. He could not flatter himself, in the face of obvious decay, that his mother would live to the green old age of Lady Pitland, who had ruled the world of fashion at seventy, and had been a power in her own little world till she was ninety.

"That is a good hearing!" said Lady Lashmar, with a smile which altered the whole character of her face—the mother's adoring smile. "And you will marry, I hope, very soon. No anchor like a good wife."

"I am not in a hurry to be anchored," answered Lashmar, laughing; "but I have a receptive mind and am ready to fall in love at short notice now that politics are off my mind. What have you here in the way of beauty, mother mine?"

"The Bishop of Southborough is to be here in a week or so, with his two daughters, pretty, fresh young girls, and both musical. I should not object to either as a daughter-in-law. Then there is old Lord Banbury's daughter, the Diana of

Northamptonshire, a frank open-hearted girl, and a superb horsewoman. She comes with Mrs. Mulciber, an old friend of mine."

"I am glad you haven't got Banbury himself. He is a dreadful old driveller. Lady Sophia is a good sort of girl, but she has made herself a great deal too public, and is written about in the sporting papers as if she were a jockey. I think one of them called her 'Our Soph.' 'Our Soph's performances with the Pytchley have been creating the usual sensation,' or something of that kind. I don't think you would like our Soph for a daughter-in-law."

"Old Lord Banbury was a friend of your grandfather!"

"Was he? Then he must have been one of the few friends my grandfather was allowed to choose for himself. Lady Pitland would never have tolerated him on her list. Well, mother; who else is coming?"

"There is Mr. Nestorius. The rest are all your own invitations."

"Oh! my invitations are rather *ad captandum*, given on the spur of the moment. There is Mr. Ponsonby, the famous Q. C. and Conservative Member—Ponsonby who saved Mrs. Brownrigg,

don't you know, in the starving case that made such a sensation seven or eight years ago. Ponsonby began life as a Rad, but is now a High Church Tory—swears by Laud, adores Pusey, and weeps when the disestablishment of the Irish Church is mentioned; attributes all our Irish troubles to that destructive measure. I wonder how he and Nestorius will get on under the same roof?"

"They have been under the same roof before," said her ladyship.

"Yes; but that was a bigger roof, and they were not upon company manners."

"Mr. Nestorius is always charming. Whom else have you asked?"

"Captain Vavasour, the society novelist, and his wife; such a delightful little woman, airy, fascinating, eccentric, audacious—just like one of her husband's novels. I think she must sit to him for all his heroines!"

"Perhaps she writes his books?"

"Not she! Aurelia is one of those delicious creatures who never do anything for themselves; not so much as to fill in a card of invitation, or run up to the nursery to look at a sick baby. Vavasour writes all her letters and fills in all her

cards, and she sends her maid to ask after her babies. She would not be half so graceful and charming if she were not the quintessence of selfishness. I once heard a woman ask her what her gown cost. 'Haven't the least idea!' she answered sweetly. 'I never ask what things are going to cost lest I should be afraid to order them.'"

"Then your Vavasours are in debt, I conclude."

"Enormously."

"I feel sure that I shall loathe this person."

"I doubt it. But please don't show your aversion in any case. Don't freeze the poor little thing with the pride of the Fitz Rollos. That would be to break a butterfly upon a wheel."

"I don't suppose she would care. A woman of that kind is always case-hardened. Did I tell you that Lady Carminow will be here for a week or two? She wanted to run in and out as she used when she was a girl, but I have insisted upon her sending over her trunks. She will help to amuse Mr. Nestorius."

"No doubt. Mr. Nestorius is impressionable, and a widower. Lady Carminow would make him a capital wife."

"My dear Lashmar, he is old enough to be her father."

"Greatness is of no age. Nestorius at fifty is more attractive than the common herd of young men; and for a woman of Lady Carminow's ambitious temper he would be especially attractive. She has secured her coronet. She has made herself a marchioness, and no one can unmake her. The next step would be to secure an ex-prime minister for her husband and slave."

"That is all nonsense. Clarice is full of romance."

"Her marriage with a notorious sot would imply as much."

"It was a noble feeling which prompted that unhappy union. She wanted to reclaim him."

"She wanted to be Lady Carminow. Don't look so unhappy, mother. I like your favourite well enough. I once almost thought myself in love with her, but that was when I was young and foolish."

"You need not be afraid of her fascinations now," said Lady Lashmar, piqued at his manifest indifference. "Clarice is much too well off as a widow to wish to change her condition."

"Precisely. She is one of those sensible

women who can estimate the value of everything. She knew the value of a marquis's coronet: so much for the strawberry-leaves, so much for the pearls. She knows the exact value of her position as Lord Carminow's childless widow. It is not very much, bar the title. Take my word for it, mother, she would marry again—to better herself."

Lady Lashmar did not argue the point. She was bent upon masking her batteries, if possible. Men are such kittle cattle; and if Lashmar once took it into his head that she was bent on match-making he would set his face against Clarice and all her charms. She would trust to the chapter of accidents, and to Lady Carminow's beauty, which was in its zenith.

That beauty came almost as a surprise on Lashmar by-and-by, when Clarice sauntered into the library at afternoon tea-time. He was unprepared for so much loveliness, albeit he had talked with her last June for five minutes on the stairs at the Foreign Office. That girlish loveliness, *svelte*, flowing, alabaster fair, had expanded into a royal beauty. Lady Carminow was much less slim than she had been in her girlhood, but her stoutness—if it must be called by so vulgar

a word—was a Juno-like stoutness, and her loveliness was enhanced by expansion. The alabaster tint was still more dazzling, it had that transparent brilliancy which Horace sings of. Her golden-auburn hair was piled in a coronet above the low classic brow. The turn of the neck was statuesque in its perfection, the carriage of the small head was full of unaffected dignity. The plainly made gown of lustreless brown silk set off the gracious figure with a noble simplicity. The lovely wrist and hand looked all the lovelier under a severely cut sleeve with a narrow cuff of old Mechlin lace.

“How strange that we should meet for the first time in this room,” said Clarice, when she and Lashmar had shaken hands, and she had ensconced herself in the most comfortable of all the comfortable chairs which were grouped about the hearth and tea-table. “Do you remember that afternoon when you showed me the wonderful books, and when we found that poor little savage sitting on a ladder?”

“Indeed, I have not forgotten. I was reminded of the fact this morning by the sight of my brother’s *protégée*. My mother tells me she has

become a bidable young person, and very useful to her as a reader."

Clarice shrugged her shoulders, and gave a faint shiver.

"I should not like such a person about *me*," she said; "but dear Lady Lashmar seems quite taken with her of late."

Dear Lady Lashmar disavowed any such friendly a feeling for the girl. "She is useful to me," she explained; "I require some one to read to me, and she reads well. That is all."

"I am always afraid of self-educated people," said Clarice, "they are so arrogant, and so ambitious; almost always Radicals, thinking, poor creatures, that book learning is the only thing that counts, and forgetting their hopeless ignorance of everything *we* know."

"And that naturally means everything worth knowing," said Lashmar, smiling at her across his teacup.

"Well, you will acknowledge that in society manners and *savoir-faire* are of much more importance than Latin and Greek," said Clarice, with conviction.

"I see you are one of those people who think

that the classics are the exclusive property of half a dozen elderly gentlemen in the universities, who seldom wash, and who could hardly muster a hair brush among them," replied his lordship laughingly.

Lashmar sipped his tea, and enjoyed the restfulness of this lazy afternoon hour, when dressing for dinner seems too far off to be thought of as a burden. He has been the first to arrive; his guests were expected by a later train; so he and his mother and Lady Carminow had this delicious interval all to themselves.

It was a new thing for him to take tea in that grandiose old library, with its bossed ceiling, rich in gold and vermilion, seeming to repeat the colour of the Grolier bindings. Hitherto the room in which Hubert, Lord Lashmar, had lived his pensive unoffending life had been a sealed chamber, dedicated to the memory of the dead, as it were a tomb in the mansion of the living. But within a week of her son's return Lady Lashmar had made up her mind to re-open the library as a general sitting-room—a pleasant place for afternoon tea—a haven in the evening for elderly people who love quiet, or for those unmusical souls who care not for the modern sonata or the

modern ballad. It was Clarice who had talked Lady Lashmar into this innovation.

"The library is quite the handsomest room in the Castle, and you leave it, figuratively speaking, to bats and owls," she said. "What is the good of fine rooms if one does not use them? The Lashmar library is the one great feature of this house, and you don't even let people see it."

Lady Lashmar yielded; and it was Lady Carminow who with her own fair hands, and the aid of half a dozen housemaids, re-arranged the room after the luxurious modern idea. She introduced delicious little Alma Tadema-cum-Queen Anne chairs and tables, things half Pompeian, half old English. She made delightful corners with old Indian screens, seven leaved, golden, beautiful; and she set groups of palms in richest red pottery vases. She knew exactly where all the prettiest things were to be had, and what to order. The Genie of the Lamp was hardly more expeditious in the art of furnishing.

Lashmar was delighted.

"What a sensible idea to use this big old room for living in," said Lashmar, lolling back in a nest of tawny plush, and looking round at the

black and gold screens and vermilion tables and palms and peacock's feathers.

"It was Lady Carminow's idea. You have her to thank for the change."

"Then I do thank her, most cordially."

"Oh, but it is I who ought to be thankful," cried Clarice. "I delight in arranging a room. I am almost as officious as Lady Hillborough, who cannot be half an hour in anyone's drawing room without re-arranging all the chairs. Now, Oriana has a genius for chairs; but if I have any talent it is for corners. How do you like that corner with the seven-leaved screen and the palms?"

"It is simply perfection; a haven in which to dream away wintry days, too blissful to regret the summer; a nook for a flirtation, for a proposal even. Young ladies on their promotion ought to be very grateful to you, Lady Carminow."

"I am very fond of nice girls," murmured Clarice, with an air of matronly superiority worthy of a grandmother.

Afternoon tea lasted a long time upon this particular occasion. It was dusk when the two ladies closed their work-baskets and went off to their own apartments, Lady Lashmar to secure

an hour's rest before she put on velvet and diamonds to receive her son's guests, who were all to arrive in time for dinner; Clarice to waste an hour pleasantly over Ohnet or Daudet, or the milder Gréville.

A few minutes before seven there came a great clanging of doors, and the corridors echoed with strange voices, whereby Lady Lashmar, resting her wearied nerves as best she might, knew that the people had all come. She could not help listening for Mr. Nestorius's voice amidst that Babel of mistresses and maids; and she heard a few words uttered calmly by that mellifluous organ. Depth and smoothness were the chief characteristics of the ex-minister's voice. Soft, grave, and yet strong were those tones which had ruled in the senate, which had touched the hearts of women. Perhaps it was this voice which had been the most powerful influence in Mr. Nestorius's career. He had that fine flow of language and those ever-musical tones which enable a man to talk nonsense unchallenged, nay, rather to make nonsense appear logic, or wit, as the orator chose.

How reposeful, how soothing sounded that voice amidst the chatter of the women and the

haw-hawing of the men. Captain Vavasour was making as much fuss as the noisiest of women, but then, as he had to look after his wife's luggage and his wife's poodle, as well as his own port-manteau, there was some excuse for him.

"I wonder how I shall get on with these people," thought the dowager; "they are horribly noisy, and their voices have a vulgar twang. Thank heaven there is Clarice to take them off my hands."

At ten minutes to eight she was in the drawing-room, and the strangers were being duly presented to her, as she sat supported on one side by Mrs. Mulciber, a spreading woman in a gray satin gown, and by Lady Sophia Freemantle on the other.

Lady Sophia was a tall, well-made young woman, with the square shoulders which were considered intolerable thirty years ago, but which are permitted and even approved nowadays. She was not handsome; she would have scorned to be so. She had a healthy, brunette complexion which had been buffeted by all the winds of heaven, and shone on by the sun, until it had acquired a permanent bronze and a harder consistency than belongs to the cheek of beauty.

She had regular features, a small, sharp nose, and a determined mouth and chin; a mouth that had grown resolute in encounters with obstinate horses, refusing the same ditch thirty times on end, to be beaten by Lady Sophia at the thirty-first. She had a loud voice that had grown strong in conversations carried on in the open air, and often at longish distances—with labouring men at the further side of a field, and sometimes with tramps and wayfarers just within hail; discussions as to which way the hunted fox had gone; or as to whether an animal lately seen was or was not the hunted fox. There is always a chance of being deluded by that social impostor—the fox out for a quiet airing, and only distinguishable from the real hero by his smug respectable aspect and clean brush.

On horseback Lady Sophia looked better than one woman in twenty, not only for her willowy waist or the fit of her habit, but for the admirable pose of that slim, tall figure, and the perfect adjustment of the rider to every movement of the horse. In an evening gown Sophia looked her worst, and she regarded the whole question of evening gowns with supreme indifference. Her dark red satin was at least three

seasons old, as Lady Carminow's keen eye perceived in an instant, and the colour was much too near the carnation of the wearer's cheek to be becoming.

Lady Carminow was at the other end of the drawing-room, half buried in a gigantic chair, and slowly fanning herself with a great ostrich feather fan, while she listened to Mr. Nestorius. She was looking divinely lovely. Her large, fair bust and shoulders looked dazzling in their Parian whiteness against the hedge-sparrow velvet of her gown. Hedge-sparrow had been the fashionable colour of last season. Women had lived and moved and had their being only in hedge-sparrow gowns. The colour was that of a hedge-sparrow's egg, be it understood, not of the sparrow himself, a turquoise blue with just the faintest greenish tint, a colour which became blondes to perfection; and as most women are blondes nowadays, or make themselves so, the hue had enjoyed a tremendous vogue.

If there was a particularly attractive woman in a room it generally happened that Mr. Nestorius and she were together. He was said to be a magnetic man, and it was an attribute of his magnetism always to draw the nicest women about

him. Pallid faces and thrilling tones have an almost irresistible charm for women. Your healthy-looking man, with a florid complexion or a harsh voice, has hardly any chance.

It was within two minutes of the hour, and Lady Lashmar was beginning to look angry, when Mrs. Vavasour came gliding in, clad in a dragging garment of limp lace and muslin, which might or might not be a gown. There was that marked disproportion between the lady and her clothes which is so often seen nowadays as to be no longer surprising. The lady was so exuberant, and the gown so exiguous, that had it not been for an immense garland of Maréchal Niel roses, which made a kind of flower-bed across the ample bust, Lady Lashmar would have been inclined to order the new-comer out of the room.

As it was she acknowledged her son's introduction somewhat stiffly, gave Mrs. Vavasour the tips of her fingers, and only recognised the lady's husband with a haughty inclination of her head: for it was her ladyship's opinion that when a married woman made a spectacle of herself, the husband was more to blame than the wife.

In those circles in which Mrs. Vavasour moved it had been often said that she was utterly charm-

ing: but that a stranger required half an hour to get accustomed to her.

She was certainly pretty; but that her beauty was either made or marred by art was indisputable. The cloud of golden fluffiness which surrounded her head, seeming almost too ethereal for actual hair, the definite line of dark eyebrows, and the lashes clogged with ebon dye, the porcelain whiteness and the rose-leaf bloom were all from the same source; and a child of four years old could scarcely have been innocent enough to mistake the picture for reality. But the general effect was considered good, and, as Mrs. Vavasour's reputation had never been clouded by the breath of scandal, the lady was caressed and courted, and her little ways were considered charming.

Her manner was quite as artificial as her complexion. She drawled out her delight at making Lady Lashmar's acquaintance in the latest slang, and with the latest abbreviations; Lady Sophia contemplating her calmly with her hawk's eyes all the time, as if she had been some new specimen in that animal world of rats, weasels, stoats, ferrets, polecats, and other unclean vermin which Lord Banbury's daughter knew so intimately.

Mr. Nestorius was, of course, entitled to the arm of his hostess, and Lady Carminow to that of her host; Mr. Ponsonby, the barrister, took Mrs. Vavasour, and good natured Mrs. Mulciber put up with the Rector, who had been asked, as it were, to open the shooting season with a good old Anglican grace, short and unintelligible. Captain Vavasour took in Lady Sophia. They had travelled by the same train, and were as friendly as if they had been brought up in the nursery together, Sophia's experience of the hunting-field having given her all the ways of jolly good fellowship; but this familiarity with the fashionable novelist did not prevent her almost ignoring his wife.

"I am afraid Mrs. Vavasour and I can't have much in common," she said, ducking to get a glimpse of that radiant lady athwart a grove of silver trophies, in the way of racing cups and candelabra. "She doesn't look as if she hunted," inwardly adding, "not an outdoor make-up."

"And you do nothing else, I have heard," replied the Captain. "Well, it is the highest kind of fame to do one thing to perfection."

"I write a little in my humble way, but it is always about hunting," said Lady Sophia.

"Then you *are* 'Spur-box,' of the 'Sunday

Swash-buckler,'” cried Vavasour; “I have often been told as much.”

“Yes, I am ‘Spur-box,’” admitted the lady, looking modestly downward, overcome by the thought of her own fame. “I rather enjoy writing for the paper. The editor pays me very well; and there is only one thing I don’t altogether like. He insists that I should always pretend to be tipsy when I am writing, or to have been horribly tipsy over night.”

“Oh! but that is *de rigueur*. It is part of the policy of the paper. All the contributors are supposed to exist in a state of chronic drunkenness. I need not tell you that they are some of the soberest men in London, as temperate as you, Lady Sophia!”

“It is rather good fun, pretending to be hopelessly obfuscated.”

“What is supposed to be your particular vanity?”

“Soda and curaçoa. I consume gallons. I am always talking of my little failings. Sometimes I go in for green chartreuse, with fatal results. But the editor wants me to drop liqueurs, which, he says, have a snobbish tone that offends his Radical subscribers. He wants me to take to dog’s-nose. What is dog’s-nose?”

"A compound of beer and gin, particularly affected by cabmen. What is supposed to be your social status, as Spur-box?"

"Oh! it is awfully vague. I am as misty as a mythological personage. I write from all the great hunting centres. Sometimes I am at the George at Grantham, where I seem to live in the bar; for the editor will put in remarks of his own about drinks, don't you know, and I hardly know my own writing when I see it in print."

"I comprehend. He embellishes. That is hardly fair!"

"I have told him so, but he says that there must be a single mind directing the whole——"

"Just so! as, according to poor old Anchises when his son interviewed him in the under-world, there was at one time a single soul permeating the human race——"

"Anchises must be dead!" said Sophia, who only caught the classic and familiar name. "He won the Derby when I was a little tot. I remember seeing the race from my father's drag. It was the year Facile Princeps was favourite, and came in a bad third. Anchises was a mealy chestnut."

The conversation went on at this rate all through dinner. Captain Vavasour hunted, and

was fond of racing; was hand in glove with men who kept racers, and had a good deal to say about the turf. He knew old Lord Banbury's history by heart; knew what to say, and what to avoid saying. Lady Sophia did not usually like writing men. She thought them conceited and uninteresting; but the novelist charmed her. He was in the middle of a capital story about Jack Russell and the Exmoor staghounds when Lady Carminow rose swan-like at the beck of her hostess.

"What a bore!" exclaimed Sophia. "I shall have to go with the lady-pack."

And with the lady-pack the fair Sophia departed wondering whether she would find anyone sociable enough to join her with a cigarette. She carried her cigarette case in her pocket, even when she was dressed for the evening; and, in those pleasant houses where ladies were tolerated in the billiard-room, she always smoked. This was her first visit to Lashmar, and Mrs. Mulciber had warned her that it was a severe house.

Lady Carminow settled herself in a comfortable arm-chair near Lady Lashmar's particular corner, beside the wide old hearth. These two talked apart and left the other three ladies to their own devices. Sophia found the last *Satur-*

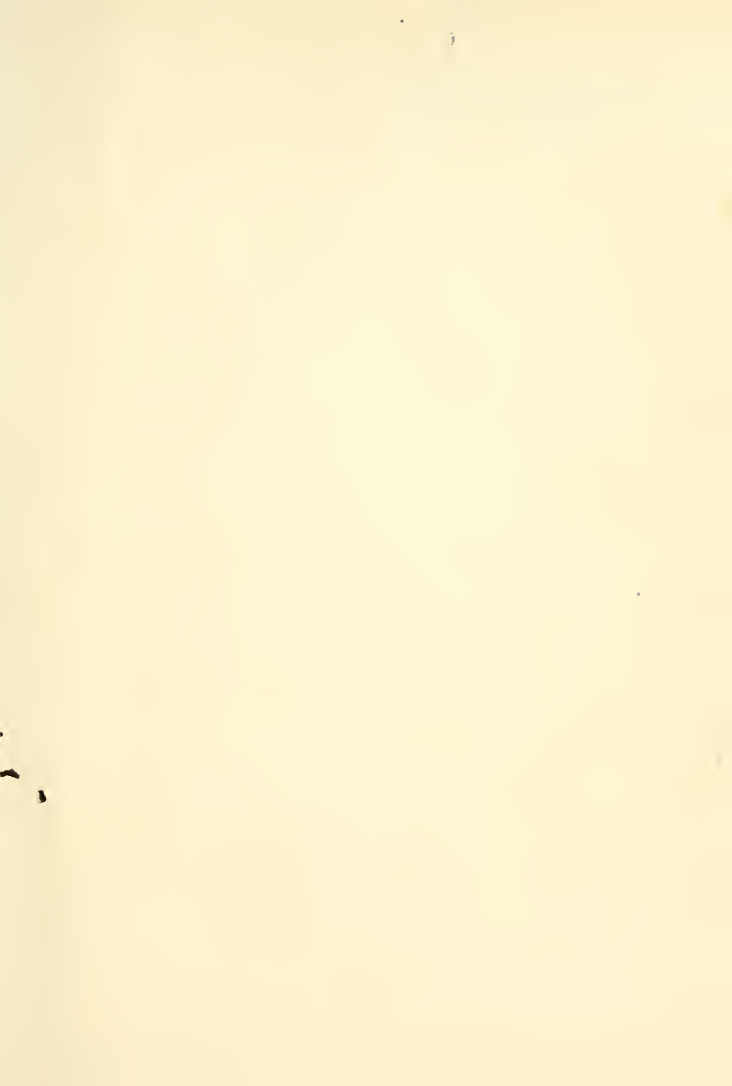
day Review with a sporting article, and retired behind that paper. Mrs. Vavasour shed her artificial radiance upon friendly Mrs. Mulciber, whom she entertained with her opinions upon the plays and operas of last season, a style of conversation which could not have warmly interested a lady who had not seen one of them.

But Mrs. Mulciber was one of those admirable women who always appear to be interested, even when they are inwardly sinking with weariness. She was a delightful listener, had very little to say herself, but said that little in a neat and pleasant manner. She had made her way in the world without advantages of birth or fortune, and with very moderate abilities. Born and bred in the middle classes, the daughter of a village vicar, she had contrived to live all her life in the very best circles, staying now at one country house, now at another; now chaperoning an orphan heiress; now keeping things straight for an aristocratic household in which the mistress was a dipso-maniac; anon looking after a widower's young children, or helping in the dirty work of a county election. She was everybody's confidante and everybody's amanuensis. She wrote a magnificent hand, and she was good at accounts. She always read the newspapers, and knew everything

that was going on in the world; but her travelling library consisted of only two books—a peerage and a Bible. These she knew by heart, and here her knowledge of literature ended. She had no imagination, and never read novels. Her mind required hard facts. Her notion of leisure was to sit at a window working high art designs of an angular ecclesiastical character upon brown holland, and she was admirable in this wise as the dragon of prudery in a country house full of lovers. For the rest she knew all the latest remedies and palliatives for neuralgia, low spirits, and insomnia, and was pleasantly officious in such cases. Her headquarters for the last three years had been Banbury Manor, where she acted as a deputy mother for Lady Sophia, whose real mother had run away with a colonel of dragoons at the mature age of nine and thirty, much to the satisfaction of old Lord Banbury, who had tyrannised over her for nineteen weary years, and was beginning to sicken of a worm which had never turned.

END OF VOL. I.

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